Tokyo Ravens Volume 05

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東京エイリアンズ
5
days in nest II
& GIRL AGAIN
あざの耕平
Kouhei Azano
ファンタジア文庫

あざの耕平
●あざのこうへい

「神仙酒コンチェルト」でデビュー。徳島県出身。代表作として「Dクラッカーズ」「BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS」シリーズなど。御守りが好きでして、有名な神社に行くたびに記念に一個買っています。そろそろ20個。応援団が作れそうですが……神様同士喧嘩はしないで下さいね。

イラスト：すみ兵
カバーデザイン：伸童舎

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東京レイヴンズ5
days in nest II & GIRL AGAIN

あざの耕平

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東京レイヴンズ5
days in nest II & GIRL AGAIN

嵐のような新入生――鈴鹿から解放され、束の間の自由を満喫する春虎と夏目。向かった先は、陰陽塾に所属する上級生のみで行われる、富士山麓の実技合宿所。

「いやぁー楽しみだなぁ、合宿！」「何しろ『一年には関係ない』もんね！」「いいよなー！」「いいよねっ」

浮き立つ心をおさえきれずにハシャぎまくる二人。しかし――

「もうっ！　ダーリンたら遅いぃ～～」

まさかの嵐が再び襲来!!　忠義心は人一倍・任侠式神コンや男装夏目を初恋の王子と慕う京子、そして謎の幼女好きまでが入り乱れ、楽しいはずの合宿は悪夢の合宿へと変貌する!?

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あざの耕平作品集

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東京レイヴンズ4 GIRL RETURN & days in nest I
東京レイヴンズ5 days in nest II & GIRL AGAIN

「……春虎君？……ちゃんと、隣にいて下さいね？」
東京レイヴンズ 5
days in nest II
&GIRL AGAIN

「あいつ……ズルイよ」
「……」
制御できない思いを抱えて、夏目は固く膝を抱えた
――春虎のこと、好きなの？

さわさわさわさわと丹念に撫でね
「……至高ね」

TOKYO RAVENS

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Chapter 1 - Chicks In The Nest

--Am I cute?

--I'm cute right?

--Say I'm cute.

--I win.

The sky was clear and cloudless on the comfortable May day. The streets of Shibuya no longer gave off the lazy air of spring, welcoming the season and a refreshing new look.

The seasons changed, spring flourishing like life blooming from a bud and preparing to enter the next phase. The people walking on the street were also all in high spirits.

Unfortunately, not everyone could move forward so positively like the seasons.

"......Ah....."

Tsuchimikado Harutora walked on the asphalt road with a lifeless expression, lifeless face, and lifeless presence, heading towards the Onmyou Academy building. He walked on the familiar road with heavy footsteps, his entire body lacking motivation.

Next to him was his childhood friend, Tsuchimikado Natsume, the master that he served as a shikigami according to 'family tradition'.

Natsume wasn't any better than Harutora. She had a languished expression, a languished face, and a languished, low-spirited presence as she walked next to her childhood friend. Her beautiful self had become a withered flower, and it was quite difficult to tell that that figure walking to the academy was a prodigious excellent student. The black uniform she wore contrasted with her greatly.

"......Ugh..... I really don't want to go to class....."

"......Yeah....."

"......I don't actually want to skip class, I just don't want to go to school....."

"......I understand..... I really understand your feelings....."

"......Ahh..... I really don't want to go in the academy....."

"......Yeah....."

It wasn't too hard to understand this situation if it were just Harutora, who essentially had a negative attitude towards studying. But it was rare and even unprecedented for the serious, hardworking Natsume to be as depressed as Harutora.

It wasn't because of the so-called May Fever that the two of them were so listless. Actually, they had lost their fighting spirit last month already.

Everything could be attributed to a new student who had just entered the Onmyou Academy - Dairenji Suzuka, a First-Class Onmyouji known as the 'Child Prodigy' and who had a fatal relationship with the two of them. She had entered the Onmyou Academy to study with the identity of a special student - and she had noticed Natsume's 'secret'. Since then, Suzuka had used this as leverage on the two, making them into slaves who had to obey her orders and who she bullied wantonly.

On the outside, she maintained the idol appearance of the youngest of the Twelve Divine Generals, but in secret, she bullied the two who had no means to oppose her. Her behavior was insidious and cunning. Since they couldn't beg their teachers or classmates for help, the two could only silently endure the outrage that was Suzuka.

As for the 'secret' that Suzuka had a hold of, in short, it was Natsume's 'true identity'. Natsume wore the black male uniform, hiding her own gender according to the tradition of the famous Tsuchimikado family. She had entered the Onmyou Academy to study posing as a male, but actually she was a girl. The people who

knew this secret included Harutora of the Tsuchimikado branch family as well as the good friend and classmate of the two, Ato Touji. However, before Suzuka had entered the Onmyou Academy - in the summer of last year - she had once seen Natsume first-hand when she was back home, when she was dressed as a miko with her original appearance and trying to impede Suzuka's actions.

"......Hey, Natsume....."

"......What is it, Harutora....."

"......You were dressed as a miko last year....."

"......I was dressed a miko last year..... So what?"

"......Can't we pretend you're actually a guy who crossdresses?"

"......It would be good if we could smooth things over that way..... But she shouldn't be that easy to fool, right? Also, it's too late to look for reasons now."

"......That's true....."

"......It's no use to struggle anymore....."

"......Everything's over....."

"......There's no chance of success at all....."

The two of them spoke listlessly and depressedly. Natsume had purposefully feigned a boy's tone when she was posing as a male in the past, even towards Harutora, but recently she showed her 'true nature' often. It was evidence of how exhausting her everyday life was and how hard she had it.

"Come to think about it, it's all your fault because you went to eavesdrop at the store that we're so miserable now!"

"Didn't I apologize many times for that?"

"At the start, you said that you would leave things to me. Could it be that you don't trust me?"

"Those things are over now, how long are you going to bear a grudge? Also, Harutora, back then weren't you also--!"

The two of them started arguing and finding fault with the other, and the pedestrians on the side of the road hastily moved away one by one in surprise. The two of them didn't have the energy to pay any heed to the surrounding responses, too busy arguing.

Since they had been persecuted by a tyrant for a long time, the originally deep relationship between the childhood friends had taken a hit. This kind of quarrel had almost become commonplace recently. Excessive pressure and exhaustion led to the mind becoming overburdened, and to lighten the pressure, the mind seeked an emergency escape outlet to vent itself, starting the mind's self-defense mechanisms. The two of them argued fiercely with each other for a while, then suddenly went silent like they had lost their power. Their faces, which once again seemed gloomy, was the best proof.

The symptoms had already entered the final stage.

"......Sorry....."

"......No..... I should apologize....."

The two of them lowered their gazes, apologizing to each other with wooden tones.

It was Natsume's own fault that her identity had been exposed for making a big mistake and acting impulsively. But, since Suzuka remembered Natsume's appearance, the problem of her identity being exposed was just a matter of time. When she had appeared before the two of them again, they no longer had anywhere to run.

Harutora and Natsume sighed in unison, once again walking towards the academy building with heavy steps. They were numb inside, even gradually losing the feeling of 'emptiness'.

"......She'll probably call us to come over again today....."

"......Probably after school ends....."

"......She'll probably make us talk about what happened in the first year again....."

"......I really don't know what else there is to talk about..... No, there's something..... But....."

"......All that's left are things that we 'can't talk about'....."

"......Yeah....."

Their melancholic faces once again twisted in bitterness.

"......Why is it that we can never trick her with those harmless lies... Does that brat have telepathy or some other extraordinary ability....."

"......We're too bad at lying....."

"......Can we find some way to resolve this....."

"......What can we do....."

The two childhood friends repeated their dejected conversation.

A new day was about to start in the sunny, comfortable month of May.

Story 1 - The Pair in the Snowscape

An icy chill permeated the interior of the twenty tatami room.

Snowflakes flew around outside, the tree branches in the courtyard completely covered by a layer of white snow. The cold air seeped soundlessly into the room as if a frost would emerge at any time.

This was the Tsuchimikado main family residence--

The 'Bellflower Room'.

An altar was set up in the room, with green sakaki and gohei on it. In the center were consecrated five standing colored paper gohei in blue, red, yellow, white, and black, symbolizing the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. Pottery was placed on the table, with salt, rice, and hemp in the tall plate and the bottles filled with water and sake. In addition, there was snapper and several kinds of fruits and vegetables.

In addition, the family crest, the 'Seimei Bellflower Mark', was painted on the altar in thick black marks of ink.

Several candles were set on the altar, their flame flickering and hazily illuminating the scene on the altar.

There were three people inside the Bellflower Room, separable into the Tsuchimikado family's next heir - Tsuchimikado Natsume - and the branch family's son, who was also Natsume's shikigami - Tsuchimikado Harutora. The other person was the Tsuchimikado family's current heir - Natsume's father.

Natsume's father wore a kimono, holding a peachwood bow made for exorcism. He chanted an eulogy towards the altar, often fiddling with the un-nocked bowstring of the peachwood bow.

Twang--

The bowstring resounded in the room, vibrating the cold air, and then disappeared, dissipating outwards accompanied by the eulogy.

His fingertips played out a distinct rhythm on the bowstring, like an ancient musical instrument. Natsume danced with the simple music as an accompaniment.

She wore miko clothing, an arrow held in her hand, an arrow made out of a reed stem.

Twang. The bowstring sounded - Natsume danced gracefully, the crisp noise of her clothing rubbing together and the light noise of her stepping on the floor sounded, followed by creaks.

Her black hair danced as if following the bowstring, her long sleeves fluttering as if swaying with the bowstring. Snowflakes also danced around.

Harutora kneeled in a corner of the room, gazing at the miko's dance - the Kagura.

The cold air made his nose go red, and his lips lightly emitted white fog. He straightened his back, gazing seriously at Natsume.

The candles cast several dim shadows next to him. With every move Natsume made, the miko's figure swayed soundlessly in the firelight, vanishing and re-emerging like a mirage in the candlelight.

Yin and yang. Yang and yin.

Harutora watched the dance closely, and Natsume silently danced.

The eulogy was chanted endlessly, and the peach wood bow sounded the cords. Aura filled the room, spilling outside the room and rising straight into the sky.

The solemn ceremony continued as if it would never end.

The solemn bells of New Year's Eve came from the distance.

The next day was a sunny, comfortable winter day, fitting to be the first day of the year.

The sparrows chirped shrilly as Harutora and Natsume walked on the countryside road. Natsume walked in front and Harutora followed behind, the two of them separated by a distance of a few steps.

Around them was a paddy turned into a snowfield. Mountains covered by white snow stretched in the distance, and if they looked as far as they could across the open plain, they would happen to see a home that looked a lot like an island drifting in a white sea. This scene, like a white slate, was perfect for the new year.

"......The air here really is crisp." Harutora breathed deeply, emitting white fog.

With his deep breath, the clear mountain air seemed like it could purify his body, like a refreshing drink from a transparent spring.

Harutora's words seemed to not reach Natsume's ears. He saw her advance forward with quick steps without even turning around.

She silently and indifferently advanced. The countryside road extended straight ahead, the signs of tires faintly visible on the snow. Harutora and Natsume stepped on them as they walked on the show-covered road.

Harutora walked leisurely, but Natsume's steps seemed a bit impatient.

"It's fortunate that the weather's clear, it's great."

"....."

"It was really unfortunate yesterday that the taxi driver had to get off to install snow tires halfway through."

"......Yeah."

Natsume spoke while stepping on the snow, finally replying to Harutora's words.

Harutora wore a heavy sweater, with a jacket on top of it. A scarf was wrapped around his neck and his hands were inserted in his jacket pockets as he used his elbow to carry his athletic bag.

On the other hand, Natsume wore the Onmyou Academy uniform. She wore the Onmyou Academy-designated coat, with the male uniform underneath that outer layer. Her long hair was tied up by a ribbon. She was posing as a male student, greatly different from her miko outfit yesterday night.

The two of them were on the road back to their dorm in Tokyo.

Natsume was obeying the main family 'tradition', pretending that she was a male in front of outsiders. She happened to assume the post of a miko on the occasion when

there were no outsiders, but she continued to pose as a male when she returned to Tokyo.

"....."

"....."

Natsume's footsteps were still fast after she replied. Her back looked cold as she walked in front, with no intention of heeding Harutora, but she wasn't mad, nor was she in a bad mood. She was just moving forward indifferently without any particular emotion. She had been like this since yesterday.

Harutora let out white fog again, casually calling out: "......Hey, Natsume."

"What?"

"We could wait until the bus is about to come to leave."

"Keep going, there's a bus on another line that we can take. There should be a bus coming soon."

"Oh, yeah..... I know that, but....." Harutora stammered, and Natsume finally stopped when she heard that, turning to look at Harutora behind her. "Sorry, Harutora-kun, for making you come with me....." She spoke apologetically, regret written all over her face like she had only noticed it now.

"You don't need to be polite." Harutora shook his head hastily. "It doesn't matter to me, since there wouldn't be anyone around if I went back home anyway." After saying that, he pried into Natsume's business a bit. "But-- Is your home always..... like that?"

"......Yes."

Natsume nodded her head bitterly, her expression without any intent at all of being self-deprecating, but rather quite calm. Harutora couldn't reply for a while, only replying after some time: "...I see."

Then, the two of them began walking again. Harutora walked next to Natsume, side by side with her.

Harutora supported the athletic bag on his arm, and Natsume also had a duffel bag over her shoulder. They had hurried back here from Tokyo yesterday during New Year's Eve, their goal being last night's ceremony. Every New Year's Eve, Natsume would carry out a 'great purification' ritual with her father in the main family residence and purify the misfortune of the year.

This year - No, now it already counted as last year - she had continued the convention of the past, returning to her old home to carry out the ritual. Her shikigami Harutora had taken the opportunity to come with her.

They had only stayed for one night, preparing as soon as they had arrived yesterday night, and afterwards immediately and constantly carrying out the ritual. They had immediately slept after finishing the ritual, and promptly left the main family residence the next day after finishing breakfast. Excluding the time of transportation, the two of them hadn't even stayed here for half a day.

"It's almost like a business trip." Harutora murmured blankly.

Actually, the two of them might have been even more busy these past few days than someone on a business trip. The daughter had finally come back for New Year's, but the father and daughter almost hadn't spoken any words at all. They had formally greeted each other with a few words, but their only discussion topic was how to carry out the ritual. Judging by the attitudes of the two, this kind of situation was commonplace, but Harutora who had come together with her felt uncomfortable.

Natsume seemed to also notice Harutora's awkwardness. She had apologized for this matter just now.

"I haven't seen Uncle in a while..... He's still the same as before, he hasn't changed at all." Harutora spoke carefully and cautiously.

"......He doesn't like interacting with others." Natsume muttered a reply upon hearing her childhood friend's frank feelings. On that note, the expression on her face had no anger or embarrassment. She was just casually speaking her own thoughts. She herself only had thin emotions for the father she had blood relations with. This attitude wasn't quite the same as being indifferent. She had long since seen through things, so she purposefully acted cold. Also, she didn't just act this way towards her father - perhaps also towards herself.

It wasn't Harutora's place to mind the family matters of others. He didn't know what to say, as he had only seen the surface of things after all.

"Harutora-kun's family....."

"What?"

"Harutora-kun's family's situation - I only noticed that my own family was a bit different after seeing how Uncle and Aunt got along." Natsume couldn't conceal her hesitation, and Harutora almost replied 'It's not a bit, it's very different' to her, but he hastily suppressed himself and swallowed his words.

Natsume didn't have a mother, and she only had her father to call family, and that father was cold as ice to his daughter. She didn't know how a normal family interacted, so she didn't get mad or fuss. It was a natural, calm response.

Of course, Natsume's father didn't mistreat his daughter, nor did he escape from his societal responsibility and duty that he bore as a father. In particular, he had seriously taught her magic since Natsume was young, recognizing and appreciating her ability.

It was just that he didn't have a great deal of emotion towards Natsume, but he wasn't completely emotionless. It was somewhere in the middle.

Harutora stayed silent, surreptitiously looking at his childhood friend who walked next to him.

Though it was already slowly improving, Natsume was basically still an extremely shy and unsociable person. Perhaps this was mostly because of her father - it could even be said to be caused by her growing environment. For a long time, only her childhood friend Harutora had counted as Natsume's close friend.

"......Natsume, let me ask you."

"What?"

"Do you hate your father?"

"......Do I hate him..." Natsume spoke a bit hesitatingly, an empty smile on her face. "I'm not very sure myself."

The attitude that she replied with didn't seem unusual. Maybe those were her true feelings.

Harutora checked the expression on Natsume's face, saying "...I see" again, and then silently moving his gaze to the scene around him.

The surface of the snow melted under the dawn's illumination, glittering with light and flashing with a radiance. A breeze blew, and though the air was cold, it wasn't unbearably so.

A brief silence permeated. Natsume asked cheerfully as if to change the atmosphere: "But Harutora-kun, are you alright?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"You finally went back, but you're returning to Tokyo so fast."

"Oh, so that's what you meant. It doesn't matter to me, my mom and dad aren't home anyway, so I wouldn't see anyone if I went home." Harutora shrugged indifferently as he said this. "The two of them are really carefree. Their only son is toiling hard outside, but they run off to Hawaii to have fun over New Year."

"That proves they have a good relationship, isn't it very good?"

"That's true, but all the way until last year, we would always eat soba at home over New Years, but once I leave home, they go off to Hawaii..... Since they're going to Hawaii, at least they should have gone while I was there and brought me along."

"Do you want to go to Hawaii?"

"Of course I do - Wait, what? Have you gone to Hawaii?"

"No, I haven't left the country."

"Doesn't everyone normally want to go overseas to have fun? That's something everyone wants, even if it's just once." Harutora spoke angrily, bearing resentment for his parents. Natsume just looked up after hearing that, casually remarking: ".....It's really hard to imagine what it would be like to have fun overseas."

"I know it would definitely be very fun without even imagining. They went to Hawaii, Hawaii! Damn~ They should send souvenirs to Tokyo for me, right?"

"I like passing New Year's in Japan, do you dislike it?"

"I don't hate it..... But we pass the New Year the same every year, so wouldn't it be new and exciting to have a different kind of New Year's once in a while?"

"I....." Natsume wanted to reply, but her cheeks suddenly blushed red. She glanced, distraught, at Harutora next to her, looking at him for a bit and then turning her gaze away. "This New Year's was different from before..... It was fresh and... v-very fun, do you not think so?" Natsume spoke, revealing a pointed gaze, her expression looking like she was expecting something.

"Really?" Harutora still faced forward, speaking dissatisfiedly. "So it's not....." Natsume momentarily lowered her head in dejection once she heard that reply, the hope dashed from her face.

"But, right, I was just thinking about Hawaii, but this year was actually my first time not at home for New Year's." Harutora spoke as if he had only noticed this now, and Natsume immediately raised her head in excitement. "And I stayed at your house last night." Natsume vigorously nodded her head upon hearing Harutora's words.

"R, Right, we were living under the same roof yesterday night..... Ah, but it's always like that in the dorm....."

"I haven't passed the night at your house for a long time, it seems like the last time was years ago--"

"--The last time was summer vacation during sixth grade, so it's already been four years and four months."

"You replied so fast! That's incredible; your memory's amazing for being so clear."

"Huh!? It's not, I just happened to remember it....."

Replying extremely fast, Natsume turned her head, pretending not to know anything.

"Really?" Harutora asked in wonder. "......But, the last time was back in sixth grade, huh. I would always run over to your house when I was little."

"......Actually, the futon you slept on last night was your personal futon."

"What? My personal futon? Why does your house have such a thing?"

"That's also coincidence. You always slept on that futon when you came to my house in the past..... My house doesn't have visitors that often, so over time it became your futon..... Ah, right, same for the dishes."

"Uwah, those are all for my personal use? Come to think of it, I had some kind of familiar feeling when I was using them....." Harutora couldn't help but smile as he spoke.

Harutora's parents would always visit the main family residence once or twice every month, and they would almost always stay over for a night. Hence, Harutora and Natsume had often played together. When they were children, Harutora always secretly looked forward to the day they would visit Natsume's house.

He had also taken advantage of a vacation to bicycle to Natsume's house to play once. Their houses weren't close, and thinking back on it now, even he couldn't help but admire his perseverance at the time. He had desperately pedaled his bicycle, riding on the long country road that they were currently walking on, but the Harutora at the time believed that playing at the residence with Natsume was a very happy thing.

".....Yeah, it's really nostalgic." Harutora smiled slightly as he murmured, looking at the snow-covered road.

"Just nostalgic?" Natsume griped somewhat dissatisfiedly. "Don't you think it feels very refreshing? And e-exciting....."

She didn't pay any heed to Harutora's inner feelings, her question completely incongruous to his thoughts. She cast a questioning look towards Harutora again, the expectation from before emerging in her gaze again.

"A refreshing feeling, huh....." Harutora smiled wryly at his childhood friend's words. "Yeah..... That's true, you're always posing and speaking like a guy when we're in Tokyo. Now that I think about it, it's been a long time since I chatted with the 'original' you. It's extremely rare indeed and very refreshing." Harutora showed a naive smile to Natsume as he replied this way. Natsume took up the expression of a referee who had trouble over judging and how to award points.

She seemed to decide that this performance was barely qualified, so she just complained a little bit. "Is it that rare? I'm always like this when it's just you and me together....." Her heart thudded as she said this. "B-But that's true. If we were in Tokyo, it would be very rare for us to chat together for such a long time....." She continued speaking, but wavered halfway through.

Why didn't I notice earlier - No, it's not too late now - There are still opportunities to turn things around - She softly recited several inexplicable and curious words, then clenched a hand into a fist as if to urge herself on.

"Right, I also felt that the ceremony yesterday was very refreshing. After all, my family almost never performs that kind of 'proper ceremony'." Harutora spoke leisurely, then turned his head to look at Natsume. "Also, I never saw you dressed up as a miko since that incident last summer."

"Ahh, back then....." Natsume's expression seemed like she was reliving the past. To be honest, Harutora felt the same way and understood why Natsume showed this kind of expression, even though the incident had happened four months earlier.

"Honestly, it hasn't even been half a year since that incident happened. It's hard to believe."

"Yeah."

"I never even dreamed that my goal now would be to become an Onmyouji or that I would enter the Onmyou Academy around last year's New Year."

"You couldn't think of it because you're lazy and irresponsible."

"Ah, saying that is going too far. Also, you can't just blame me for this. I was born without the spirit-seeing ability, and my parents didn't ask me at all whether I wanted to become an Onmyouji..... Also, I destroyed the family tradition ...And didn't honor

our promise from before..... Uh..... Sorry." Harutora scratched his cheek with his index finger in embarrassment as he detailed.

Natsume giggled upon seeing Harutora's appearance.

"Since you already became my shikigami, you don't need to hold it to yourself."

"Oh, alright."

"Though you made me wait a bit long....."

"Uh, that's because....."

".....And your grades are bad."

"D, Don't be inconsiderate."

"It's alright, I'll teach you properly and correct you, whether it's Onmyoudou or your lazy and irresponsible personality. That's my duty as a master."

".....Tch, it's always that."

Harutora frowned bitterly, and Natsume giggled happily.

Just then, a strong wind blew and the surrounding snowflakes danced lightly.

"Uwah, it's so cold." Harutora shivered, and Natsume was also unable to help but close her eyes tightly.

Nothing in this open area could block the wind as it blew. The momentum of the wind broke the stillness, and only then did they notice that clouds obscured the blue sky and that the sky was gradually getting dark.

"It really is hard to get through winter just relying on this jacket. I should hurry up and buy a good winter coat."

"Me too..... I would have worn something else if I knew earlier."

"Are you cold? If you don't mind, I can lend you this scarf."

"It's alright, if I put the collar up I can mostly--"

"Okay."

"Yeah..... Ah--" Natsume's entire body suddenly went stiff, an unbelievably regretful expression flashing over her face. She hastily moved her gaze towards Harutora - to the scarf on his neck--

"....."

--She struggled with her feelings.

"Huh? What's wrong?" Harutora noticed her gaze, speaking up to ask.

"No, uh....." Natsume hesitated. Though the words had reached her mouth, it was a bit embarrassing to say it again since she had already refused it once before. She held a sliver of expectation in her heart, hoping that Harutora would notice her feelings..... But, in the end he was the slow Harutora. "......Nothing." Not long after, she sighed.

Afterwards, she still showed a regretful gaze and stared at the scarf from time to time. On the road, she thought about something that could easily turn around the situation, then visually compared the length of the scarf to the distance between her and Harutora's shoulders. In the end, she gave up the thought, sighing heavily: "......It wouldn't work."

Harutora looked blankly at Natsume's suspicious actions, but then he looked at Natsume as if he had suddenly thought of something.

"......Is it because of the long black hair?"

"Wh, What are you saying?"

"You're very suitable for a miko outfit like yesterday's."

"Really?" Natsume's expression had trouble concealing her surprise upon hearing those words, but she immediately pressed him aggressively with questions: "Th, Thanks. What..... do you think is suitable?"

She showed a feigned indifference, but she actually asked very cautiously like a hunter gradually approaching an animal.

Harutora immediately replied: "It looks very pretty when you wear it."

"Very pretty?" Natsume's eyes inadvertently widened.

"And pure."

"Pure?"

"It also has some kind of mystery."

"Mystery?"

"It looks noble and elegant, like a traditional, gentle Japanese woman."

"A traditional, gentle woman!?"

Natsume's face became redder and redder, and her footsteps became unsteady as if Harutora's praise had already made her dizzy.

The results exceeding her expectations brought her more shock than joy. She was like a hunter who had originally just planned on hunting a rabbit for a good meal, but who was suddenly presented with a roasted bull. She couldn't believe it for a while because she was overly excited.

But, just as she managed to accept the truth of those remarks and as the shock was about to turn into joy, the boy nicknamed 'Bakatora' grinned evilly.

"Right, if the students in the academy saw you dressed up like that, they would never guess it was you. You're arrogant and unreasonable, shouting 'this is an insult' at the drop of a hat, so it's really impossible to imagine similarities between you and a miko..... Huh, w-wait, Natsume! Hold on, I was just joking, don't take it seriously!"

Natsume's face went red and then white, and in the end she stormed forward with a red face. Harutora hurriedly chased from behind. She stomped forcefully on the snow, her entire body trembling from anger, unable to stand Harutora's insults--"Hey, sorry." But Harutora didn't look apologetic at all, bowing to her in apology with a smile.

"Sorry, don't get that mad, it's just a little joke for the new year."

".....I don't want to hear your voice anymore this year....."

"I'm apologizing to you, so don't get mad, alright? Also, I really think you are suitable for the miko outfit, and you also danced wonderfully yesterday. I was in a daze watching it."

Harutora put his hands together, bowing his head in apology and sincerely speaking his thoughts.

Natsume clenched her teeth, glaring at Harutora while seeming to think about how to handle this person whose performance was far below the passing score. Harutora, on the other hand, didn't notice his low score at all.

"I'm telling the truth, you know. If someone saw you, they definitely wouldn't expect that you're normally always a girl posing as a guy and pretending to be male."

"......In any case, I just need to wear the male uniform and no one will suspect me to be a girl."

"Don't say that, it would be terrible if your identity got exposed. Isn't it the best that no one suspects you?"

"That..... is true....."

"Right? But everyone would definitely be incredibly surprised if they saw it. Especially Kyouko and Tenma, I'm sure they'd be shocked speechless and staring blankly." Harutora spoke jokingly without remorse.

Natsume stared at Harutora with narrowed eyes again, muttering: "......Bakatora." and sighing deeply. Then, she helplessly went along with Harutora's chat.

"......I wonder what everyone's doing right now."

"Probably the same as an ordinary person, eating New Year's food or watching TV."

"And shrine visits."

"Right, there are also people who go out to visit shrines. I've seen it on the news before, Tokyo's shrines are so packed."

"The more famous the place is, the more people participate."

"Why does anyone go somewhere so crowded for New Year's - though I want to experience it once if there's an opportunity, it seems pretty interesting." Harutora seriously pondered this meaningless trivia.

Natsume sighed helplessly, a wry smile emerging on her lips.

"Tomorrow should be packed as well, I can come with you if you want to visit a shrine..... Right, someone like Kurahashi-san should also be very busy today."

"That reminds me, Kurahashi is a distinguished family as well. Maybe they're carrying out some solemn ceremony like the Tsuchimikados."

"It's possible, but more importantly, her father's the Onmyou Agency Chief, so there are definitely many people visiting their family for New Year's. Also, Tenma-kun's family is also traditional--"

"Huh? Tenma too?"

"You didn't know? The Momoe family has quite a history..... Actually, not just Tenma-kun, but most of the students in the Onmyou Academy are children of famous traditional families."

"M, Most of them? But I guess I'm also from the Tsuchimikado branch family."

"Even if we don't want to admit it, the magic community is truly a closed and ancient world."

"Yeah..... In that sense, Touji's an outlier in this world..... I wonder if that person went home and properly passed New Year's with his family....."

"Come to think of it, Touji doesn't talk about his family much. I remember that his family is in Tokyo, right?"

"Huh.....? Oh, Yeah, right....." Harutora suddenly returned to a stammer, obviously avoiding Natsume's gaze. Natsume felt it was strange, staring at Harutora for a good while and then deciding not to force him, giving up the questioning.

"We can ask everyone what they did over New Year's after school starts. Maybe there really were people who went off to Hawaii or overseas for New Year's." Harutora changed the topic.

"Maybe there are people who use the break to study hard."

"People like that aren't friends."

"You can't say that.....! Jeez Harutora-kun, you should take advantage of the vacation to study seriously, your grades are the worst in the whole class."

"I, I know....." Harutora's expression stiffened. Natsume smiled sincerely and straightforwardly.

"But....."

"Yeah?"

".....It feels a bit unusual, being concerned about what others did over their vacations like this."

"Huh, is it? This is very normal--" Harutora was about to refute her, then realized when he was halfway done speaking and hastily closed his mouth. Then, he deliberately spoke grandly: "I forgot, you don't have many friends. You didn't talk with anyone there before Touji and I transferred to the Onmyou Academy, right?"

".....Yes."

Harutora tried glossing it over with a joke, but Natsume nodded honestly - and a bit embarrassedly - when she heard. She looked at Harutora, sticking her tongue out lightly. Upon seeing this kind of reaction from his childhood friend, Harutora was a

bit moved. The Natsume from before definitely wouldn't admit something like this so openly.

".....It's not bad, right?" Harutora smiled happily, as if it were something happening to himself.

"What's not bad?"

"You learned that there were a lot of very interesting people after talking to them - Right?" He asked happily.

Her shikigami's satisfied gaze made Natsume's heart resist, and she showed a displeased gaze. But she admitted defeat very fast, relaxing her body. ".....You're right." She herself smiled as she spoke, and Harutora hmphed regally with his nose.

"This is all because of me."

"Yes, it's all because of your help..... You had better take responsibility."

"Huh? What responsibility? What does that mean?"

"Think about it slowly yourself." Natsume replied with a serious face, and Harutora vaguely felt danger, but still didn't get the meaning in those words. "But--" Then, Natsume suddenly lowered her head with a complex expression. "I deceived everyone other than Touji. I didn't think that way originally..... Things recently have made it more and more painful....."

Harutora murmured an "Ah" upon hearing Natsume's sudden confession, then didn't say anything more.

Natsume posed as a male in the Onmyou Academy to deceive others, and currently the only people who knew her 'true identity' were Harutora and Touji. This included the other classmates, and even Kyouko and Tenma that she had a decent relationship also took her to be a male. Looking at it that way, she had indeed 'deceived' Kyouko, Tenma, and the other students.

Natsume went silent after saying that, and Harutora didn't know what to say for a while.

Whump - The snow on a streetlight by the side of the road fell down. Harutora unconsciously pressed his lips together. Natsume's mood was complex, but he had never thought about this for her sake. Now, he felt incomparably shameful and remorseful.

The two of them silently walked on the snow-covered road for a long time without opening their mouths to say anything.

At some point, the originally stopped snow began slowly falling again.

Snowflakes lightly drifted down from the calm, windless sky and slowly descended, stopping on Harutora's shoulders, falling on Natsume's bangs, and quietly lingering for moments before silently vanishing.

The two of them continued striding through the snow without a word.

Not long after, Harutora looked down at his feet and called out lightly. "Hey, Natsume."

Natsume looked at Harutora, not saying anything to reply.

".....That kind of thing sounds a bit strange, but I think the you that's hiding your identity is actually more 'sincere' than the original you." Harutora said.

"....."

"I understand your feelings..... Or rather, I'm trying to understand your feelings, but....." Harutora lifted his face, turning his head to stare at Natsume as he brought forth his most sincere feelings to continue speaking. "I said it before, do you still remember? You are you, it has nothing to do whether you're posing as a guy or whether you're a girl. You're the true you when you're not posing as a guy, and you're also the real thing when you're posing as a guy. At least, that's what I believe."

"....." Natsume didn't respond, but nor did she escape Harutora's gaze. Then, she smiled spontaneously, changing her tone, and saying merrily: "That's true, I didn't mean to lie in the first place. Though I'm hiding something from everyone..... But everyone in this world has secrets."

Those words sounded forced. Maybe she was pushing herself to think that way. "Th, That's right." But Harutora could only firmly express agreement right now and support her from the side.

Harutora spoke seriously: "You have no choice in doing that anyway. When the right time comes, you can clear things up with everyone. Maybe they'll get mad, but in the end they'll definitely smile and choose to forgive you..... Ah, no, it might be hard to apologize to Kyouko after you reveal it....."

"Huh? Why?"

"N, No reason! Uh - Anyways, if they get mad, they'll inevitably get mad at me - and of course Touji as well. We'll all apologize to everyone when the time comes and beg forgiveness of them."

"Okay..... I hope everyone will be willing to forgive us."

"We'll know when the time comes! Before then, we--"

"We?"

"We're accomplices."

Right? Harutora grinned again, seeming a bit self-confident, as if he were smiling at an accomplice who shared a common secret.

"...Yeah....." That way of saying things seemed to strike Natsume well. She nodded her head proudly, then couldn't help but break out into a smile.

"When we go back to Tokyo, we'll become fraudsters, right? Saying that seems like it's hinting at something, it's perfect for the situation right now."

"The situation right now?"

"Think about it....." Natsume glanced down. "Two people slipping around sneakily, walking through the snow together. Isn't that like escaping from a crime?"

"Ahh..... I guess so, it has a pretty hardcore unfeeling style."

"It's not a big deal to have a few lies, since it's a hardcore style."

"Right..... So we're a criminal pair, like a killer and his mistress - Ah, no, with our situation, it should be the oldest daughter of a famous family and her lover."

Harutora cracked a bad joke, looking at Natsume with a smile. However, Natsume's eyes widened and her cheeks burned red, staring unblinkingly at Harutora. Harutora realized what he had said upon seeing Natsume's expression, and only then did he cry out with a blush.

The two of them looked at each other with red faces. After a while, they simultaneously came back to their senses, hastily turning away.

They fell silent once again, walking on the country road with lowered heads and treading noisily on the snow.

Only a bit of distance was left to the bus stop. Not long afterwards, Natsume breathed out as if she wanted to warm her frozen hands, unhesitatingly calling out: ".....Harutora."

"Hmm?"

"Thanks."

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Fortunately, the Shinkansen line that they returned on was empty.

Since the ceremony had been carried out until very late and they had gotten up early the next day, the two of them almost hadn't slept at all. The two of them had already started snoring not long after they sat down. They sat in the window and aisle seats of a row of three, with no other passengers around.

They silently and contentedly snored one after another, sleeping soundly.

Just then, a small child somehow appeared in the seat by the walkway, kneeling in the seat with proper form. This child - more accurately, she wasn't a human, the most obvious evidence being the pair of pointed ears that poked out of her head of short, soft hair as well as the leaf-shaped tail that grew out from behind her kneeling rear.

She wasn't a human, but rather a shikigami. She was Harutora's defensive shikigami - Kon.

She kneeled in the swaying seat, her immature face inexplicably frowning, and her eyes staring straight at Natsume who sat by the window. "So you two are alone?" She pondered quietly, her tone like the detective from a short story who was about to debunk the murderer's alibi.

"......In the end, I couldn't come out even if I wanted to." Then, she stared at her master - Harutora - with a cold and vexed gaze, her tone sounding crestfallen.

Harutora and Natsume, who were next to each other, had their heads tilted as if they were resting on each other's shoulders. Kon narrowed her eyes and glared at this scene, her pointed ears continuously twitching nervously. Not long afterwards, she intruded between the two, pulling her master's and Natsume's heads apart in the other direction and sat back in her seat, facing Harutora in an upright posture, respectfully bowing her head in tribute.

"......Harutora-sama, I offer my sincerest apologies for the late greeting. I wish you a happy new year, please take care of me this year as well....."

The seat swayed. Just like when she had appeared, Kon somehow vanished without a trace.

The car approached Tokyo.

Only after almost three days of the new year had passed did Harutora remember that he had never wished his defensive shikigami a happy new year. It would take a while for Kon to forgive him about this.

Story 2 - Winter Day's Dinner

"Right, Harutora, have you thought of what to do for dinner?"

The afternoon classes had ended. After school, Tsuchimikado Natsume questioned Harutora among the Onmyou Academy classroom full of loudly chattering students.

Her black hair, tied up with a pink ribbon, gently slid across her shoulders as her head moved slightly. Harutora, who was preparing to pack his bags to return to the dorm, uttered a "Huh?", stopping his hand movements and turning to look at Natsume.

"What am I going to do? Won't I just go to the dorm cafeteria?"

Harutora asked back, confused, and then it was Natsume's turn to have a surprised expression.

"You really did forget. Wasn't a notice posted in the dorm cafeteria in the morning? Fujino-san has business tonight, so dinner won't be provided."

"Huh.....? Ah, I remember, the notice told everyone to find food themselves. I forgot." Harutora scratched his head casually.

Harutora and Natsume lived in the Onmyou Academy male dorm, and Fujino was the female manager of the male dorm. Normally, she attended to the food in the dorm.

"What should we do, should we eat out first before going back?"

"That's not bad on occasion."

"What do you want to eat?"

"Huh? Uh..... soba."

"Then I'll have udon. The weather's cold today, so a bowl of boiled udon is perfect."

"Udon again? Harutora, you always eat udon."

"I haven't eaten boiled udon in a long time, though."

"Isn't it still udon? It's rare for us to have an opportunity to eat out, so we should go eat other things, it's fine if it's not soba. For example - f-fashionable French food..... or Italian food with a refined atmosphere....."

Natsume glanced hesitatingly at Harutora, expectation clearly visible in her expression. Unfortunately, as was natural, Harutora didn't notice her feelings, speaking honestly: "But I'm short of money this month, I can't even eat much at normal small restaurants." Natsume's face fell.

"......What, Bakatora, you went with Kinoshita-senpai....."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Nothing.....! But, what should we do now? Should we just find a random fast food store?"

"It would be nice if we could find a cheap and delicious fast food store....."

The students who lived in the dorm almost all ate in the dorm, and lunch was taken care of in the academy cafeteria. The three meals weren't a problem, but all the choices they could think of were chain restaurants and fast food stores when they considered eating out. Especially for Harutora, who would almost always walk into an udon store when he wanted to eat out.

"Ah, right, Touji, do you know any good places?" He asked his classmate Ato Touji. Touji wore a bandanna around his head, which had developed into his personal trademark. He was currently living in the dorm along with Harutora and the others, but he had lived in Tokyo before, so he was even more familiar with this place than Harutora or Natsume.

Maybe because the conversation of the two had reached his ears, Touji replied extremely quickly: "I do." Then, he quickly noted: "But never mind today, we should just go back to the dorm to eat."

"Huh? But today....." Harutora asked back, while Natsume stared at Touji in surprise.

Touji grinned knowingly.

"What do you think about nabe?"

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Touji, who had made the proposal, prepared a clay pot and a small gas-powered stove. In addition, he had fish, vegetables, mushrooms, tofu, and other ingredients.

Natsume's eyes widened in surprise.

"What's up with these things?'

"Other people gave them to me."

"Other people gave them to you..... Who gave them?"

"The dorm manager who's away today."

"Fujino-san?"

Touji explained. Fujino had realized urgent business last night, so that was why she was away today, but the food had already been appropriately prepared. This morning, Touji had happened to run into Fujino in the corridor, and had asked for the food after hearing about things.

"This food was originally going to be made into our dinner, so what's wrong with taking it?"

"Nothing, nothing. Anyway, this is a big help to us."

Most dorm rooms had wooden floors, but Harutora's was tatami, which was perfect for nabe.

They got utensils from the dorm cafeteria, spreading out a folding table, assembling the small gas stove and putting the clay pot on it. The food was washed with water and placed in stainless steel bowls or plates.

In order to cook up a delicious soup, they put seaweed in the bottom of the pot, pouring water into the pot with a kettle. The soy sauce had already been prepared by the side.

Touji lit the small gas stove.

"Harutora, check the radish."

"Okay. Is the gas on? What should we start with?"

"Anything is fine."

"That's true, but the mushrooms have to be last."

"That's common knowledge."

Harutora and Touji prepared deftly. On the other hand, Natsume seemed a bit uncomfortable, kneeling in a corner of the room and staring unblinkingly as she watched Harutora and Touji's every move. She never spoke a word, in stark contrast to the joyful other two.

Touji noticed Natsume's reaction.

"Natsume, what's wrong? Are us two guys too carefree? Is there something you're not satisfied with? Come over here if you want to point something out."

"Right, you're the only girl here, so if you're good at managing things, we can leave it up to you."

"Huh, no, I.....!"

After hearing Touji and Harutora say that, Natsume hastily waved her hand.

Though she lived in the male dorm, Natsume was actually a girl. She and Harutora were from the famous Tsuchimikado Onmyoudou family, and Natsume had already been designated as the main family successor who would become the next heir. She obeyed the main family 'tradition' and posed as a male, but only Harutora and Touji who were here knew her true identity.

"Natsume, could it be that you hate nabe?"

"Th, That's not it."

"Ah, could it be that the main family also has family traditions for nabe?"

"B, Bakatora, how could there be such a thing."

Harutora and Touji asked one after another. Natsume became flustered, and they also furrowed their brows.

Just then, the sound of knocks came from outside the room.

Harutora called out "The door's open", and two students immediately opened the door and walked in. These two were their classmates, the graceful, beautiful girl Kurahashi Kyouko and the glasses-wearing, kind-looking boy Momoe Tenma.

"Oh, Natsume-kun, sorry to disturb you~!"

"Kyouko, this isn't Natsume's room, it's my room."

"Touji-kun, I brought the things from the store you told me. You wanted these, right?"

"Oh, thanks, Tenma, you can put them over there."

The two of them joined Harutora's group of three, and the small room instantly became lively. Actually, after deciding to cook nabe, they had thought that it would be more fun with more people, so they had invited two others who had been in the classroom.

Kyouko and Tenma randomly searched for somewhere to sit down.

"I haven't had nabe in a long time. But what flavor is this? The food in the pot is really mixed up."

"Huh? We aren't going for anything in particular..... We're just putting them in randomly."

"Putting them in randomly..... Why isn't there crab?'

"C-Crab? As expected of something a main family daughter would say.....!"

"Touji-kun, the thing you asked me to get was so heavy, what's inside? Ingredients?"

"Yeah, there's alcohol inside."

"Huh? H, Hold on! You couldn't be planning on drinking?"

"Haha, Touji, you said you wanted to have nabe in the dorm, but actually the food was just an excuse, your main goal was the alcohol."

"Right, I ordered it from my phone during lunchtime."

"Huh~ I've never drank before."

"It's alright Tenma and Kyouko, you don't need to force yourselves. Touji and I will drink this."

"Harutora-kun, you drink?"

"This guy is known as 'Thousand Cup Master', you know."

"Well, I happened to drink a bit with my dad before."

"Wow, it was already dangerous enough for a girl to sneak into the male dorm by herself, and you still want to drink alcohol..... Natsume-kun! If something happens, you have to protect me."

"Don't worry, probably only Natsume has the power to attack you among the group here."

"That's true."

Everyone had already become noisy before things had even started, chatting ebulliently. Everyone talked to each other as a group, exactly the atmosphere of hearthside nabe. Harutora and the others never lost the smiles on their faces either. But, Natsume was still alone in this happy, jovial atmosphere, and her expression became more and more restless as the ones next to her became noisier and noisier.

This time, Harutora noticed her appearance.

He called out "Natsume?", his expression showing worry rather than wonder.

"You've been a bit strange since just now, what's wrong? Are you not feeling well?"

After hearing Harutora say this, everyone in the room turned their gaze towards Natsume one by one. The originally clamorous room instantly fell silent. "Actually....." Natsume was flustered by everyone's attention, speaking the truth with her head lowered. "I... I've never eaten nabe....."

".....Huh? Is that true?"

"Unbelievable....."

"Y, You haven't?"

"H, How strange....."

Everyone was stunned by those words. They spoke in stammers, surprise all over their faces.

"Ah, but..... Right, your family only has you and your dad." Harutora murmured, remembering Natsume's family situation.

Natsume's mother had already died, and only her father was left in her family. Moreover, the relationship between Natsume and her father wasn't very good, so she almost had no opportunities to eat nabe with others.

"B, But, on the other hand, I always looked forward to a day like this, but like this, uh..... Though I'm happy to eat nabe with everyone, I'm a bit nervous....." She kneeled on the ground with her gaze lowered, clearly a bit embarrassed.

Harutora and the others didn't know how to respond to her choosing a time when everyone was noisily sitting around the nabe to make that remark. Harutora replied blankly: "I, I see....."

"B, But you don't need to be that formal. Nabe is for everyone to have fun and eat whatever you want!"

"I don't understand how everyone can have fun while eating....."

"No no no! Of course you can! Don't we always eat together in the academy and dorm cafeterias?"

"That's just eating your own food."

Natsume's condition was far more serious than he had imagined. Harutora hadn't expected that she didn't even have this most basic - no, this common knowledge.

Touji smiled slightly upon seeing this, standing up.

"...Alright Natsume, to help you have a good time, you drink a cup too."

"Wh, What? N, No, I can't drink! Touji, you're also underage, right?'

"It's alright, I have a license."

"What license?"

Touji didn't pay heed to the panicked Natsume, deftly opening the box Tenma had carried over and taking out the alcohol inside.

"Hey hey, how can you just take out a liter bottle of alcohol?" Harutora said with a bitter smile.

"Uwah, no wonder it was that heavy."

Touji poured sake into a cup, giving it to Natsume. Natsume declined again profusely, but she was forced to accept the cup.

"But let me ask, Natsume, can you drink?"

"D, Don't look down on me, of course I can, I like to drink sweet wine....."

"Sweet wine....."

"I can drink sacred wine too! Also, I didn't oppose you because I couldn't drink, it was because minors are forbidden from drinking.....!"

"Don't be that stubborn, you're supposed to be able to do whatever you want when you eat nabe." Touji spoke casually.

"Yeah..... Since Natsume-kun wants to drink, I'll drink too." Kyouko spoke as she put food into her mouth.

"Huh? Everyone's all drinking? Then I'll....." Even Tenma came along for the ride.

"Don't worry, I ordered a lot of alcohol." Then, Touji took canned beer and sparkling wine out of the box, putting them on the tatami.

Kyouko and Tenma seemed to be people who didn't normally drink, but they sized things up curiously and chose relatively sweet alcohol, pulling the tabs on the cans.

Natsume held the sake-filled cup with both hands, looking around in a panic. Finally, Touji poured sake for Harutora and himself.

"Does everyone have something to drink?"

He looked at everyone, checking verbally. The other four not including Natsume raised the alcohol in their hands in unison.

"Harutora, you call it."

"W, Wait, Touji! Drinking in the dorm is really.....!"

"Cheers."

The voices of the four overlapped, then they sent the alcohol to their mouth. The expressions on their faces were either satisfied, or they frowned from the bitterness - But, they immediately smiled, looking overjoyed.

"Ugh....." Natsume muttered. "I, I definitely won't drink!"

"That's not right! Nabe's not like this, it should be more like that! Not like this!"

"Okay, okay, I know. Natsume, you should put the spoon down first."

Natsume sat on the floor, the small bowls used for eating nabe in front of her knees. Her right hand held a spoon, and her left hand held a cup of sake as she agitatedly flailed them around. Her white face was flushed red and her eyes were erratic and confused.

"...Uwah! Nabe is so good, it's amazing!" She said while sipping the sake in the cup.

"That's not nabe, you're drinking sake."

Harutora corrected her helplessly, and Natsume immediately put a frown on her reddened face when she heard this, pursing her mouth. She leaned her whole body forward, glaring straight at her childhood friend.

"What, Harutora, do you have a problem? The mood's good for first time eating nabe, so what are you-- no, what do you have a problem with."

"You haven't eaten anything, you're just drinking a bunch of sake with an empty stomach. No wonder you got drunk instantly."

"Drunk? Drunk..... I'm not drunk? I'm not drunk, right?

"You're drunk if you're like that! You can't even speak clearly."

"Hey..... I'm drunk, okay, since you say so, I guess I'll be drunk....." Natsume seemed a bit depressed, but not long after, she began filling her mouth with sake again.

"--Pwah! Touji, another cup!"

She beamed with a smile, joyful and forcefully thrusting out the cup. Harutora couldn't help but sigh when he saw this.

She had become a true drunkard, and she was an annoying drunk who would go crazy. The Natsume who had so firmly refused to drink just now had vanished somewhere in the blink of an eye.

"......So N-Natsume-kun becomes like this after he drinks....."

"......W-We really shouldn't have persuaded him to drink....."

Kyouko and Tenma looked blankly at Natsume, each touched by guilt, believing that they shouldn't have casually persuaded her to drink. Natsume's wild appearance after alcohol made them not dare to continue encouraging her to drink, but Touji snickered quietly, letting out an evil laugh.

Of course, Natsume didn't care at all about the people around her. Rather, though she didn't care, she still noticed. Kyouko and Tenma's gazes made her furrow her brows.

"Hey! You two aren't eating at all! That's no good, you have to eat." She barked angrily, grabbing the large bottle from Touji's hands and pushing it in front of the two. "Didn't I just tell you? That isn't nabe, it's alcohol." Harutora hastily stopped her, but unfortunately Natsume didn't listen to his words at all.

"......What, this is my first time eating nabe, why aren't you eating?" She stared intently at Kyouko and Tenma, showing a vicious gaze as she pressured the two.

Kyouko and Tenma's faces went stiff as they glanced at each other.

"You don't need to force yourself to drink with this drunkard." Harutora spoke exhaustedly.

The two of them smiled bitterly upon hearing his words.

"Yeah, but to tell the truth, we're responsible for Natsume-kun getting drunk like this....."

"That's right, I'd feel sorry if we didn't drink with him a little."

"Hey hey, though you say that, can the two of you drink much?"

"Don't worry, I'll stop when I've had enough."

"Okay, Natsume-kun, sorry for troubling you."

After saying this, the two of them offered out their cups, and Natsume happily poured sake into their cups.

Harutora looked at the three of them, his heart full of anxiety.

The final result showed that their capacities really were as he had predicted.

"That's weird~? The crab, where'd the crab go. Hey, I haven't eaten crab! Who ate my crab!"

"......Uh, Kyouko, how many drinks is that? You drank too much."

"......U......Uu......It wasn't me, I didn't eat crab..... Really..... I don't know any crab....."

"......Tenma, there wasn't any crab in this pot in the first place. Also, what's there to cry about!"

Everyone had quickly become completely drunk, far exceeding what Harutora had predicted.

Natsume happily laughed out loud.

"Ahaha! No crab, no crab, no crab? Ahahaha."

"......Natsume, Let me remind you that you're the most drunk among everyone here. Also, what's funny about those words?"

"Ah, Harutora's looking down on me, Bakatora's getting mad at the crab, doesn't that suck, crab? Wahahaha!"

"......I can't do anything, I give up....."

The image of the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family, the prodigy of the Onmyou Academy, and his childhood friend had suddenly vanished from Natsume. He wished he had known she was such a bad drunk earlier, because the way she had been when she had been nervous about her first time eating nabe was much more relaxing.

"Don't you feel hot?" Not long afterwards, Kyouko said this and began taking off her clothes. "No way. Hey, Kyouko?" Even though Harutora was panicked, he didn't turn around to look.

She managed to undo her buttons with her hands, slowly removing the outer layer. She loosened the tie, opening the neckline of her shirt.

Her cheeks were flushed red, and her tied-up hair was a bit messy, looking extremely sensational. It couldn't be seen from under the imperial clothing-like uniform of the Onmyou Academy, but Kyouko actually had quite a nice body. A seductive scene appeared in front of him, and Harutora really had no idea where to put his gaze.

"What 'protect me if something happens', how can others protect you if you take off your own clothes..... Kyouko! Your skirt! Your skirt is open!"

"Hmm~.....? Ah."

Her stocking-covered thighs were almost all exposed. Kyouko rearranged her skirt, glaring at Harutora with misty eyes.

"Hey, can you please not look wherever you want? Guys always..... stare."

"Wh, Who's staring? And what does 'look wherever you want' mean? I'm behaving like a gentleman here!"

"Hmph..... Whatever, I can't blame you for myself being so cute. I'll forgive you this time."

"What do you mean 'forgive', you should be the one apologizing to me!" Harutora hastily tried to resolve the misunderstanding with a red face, but Kyouko just exclaimed "It's so hot" with an indifferent face. She lifted her hair, making Harutora feel even worse at the fact that each and every action of hers looked so charming.

"....." Natsume stared at their war of words, the smile disappearing from her lips. "Ahh, I'm also hot!" Then, she purposely spoke and slowly took off her outer clothing. She didn't undo the buttons, just directly pulling the whole thing off from above. It got stuck as she pulled it up, so her body just squirmed constantly. It was too tragic to watch.

"Idiot! Natsume, stop it!" Harutora frantically rushed out, pulling the uniform down on Natsume's body.

The fact that Natsume was posing as a male in the Onmyou Academy was a secret that couldn't be revealed. The curves of her body couldn't be seen easily underneath the Onmyou Academy uniform, and the shapelessness of it helped Natsume out a lot, hiding the fact that she was actually a girl. But--

"What are you doing, Harutora! It's so hot, I want to take off some clothes!"

"You can't! If you take off your clothes, it's over! You can't do that!"

"Uwah, Natsume-kun is lifting his clothes..... Ah! Harutora, don't stop him."

"I heard you, Kyouko! Do you know what you're saying?"

"......Uu, I'm not hot, why is it only me..... Maybe it's because I didn't drink enough....."

"It's fine if you're not hot! Tenma, even you're thinking of taking your clothes off?"

"......But, you can't see anything even if Natsume takes everything off but his shirt....."

"Touji! Stop speaking nonsense!"

"Uwah, Harutora, Touji's bullying me."

"Stop it, Natsume!"

Harutora retorted one after another without any opportunity to catch his breath at all. Not only he didn't have time to drink, but also couldn't eat the nabe.

"Touji, won't she drink too much like this? Stop filling her cup."

"Huh? It's rare to be able to drink happily, it's alright."

"I can't stand you....." Harutora couldn't help but reproach his good friend. But just then, he suddenly noticed a more fundamental and serious problem. His face instantly changed.

"Hold on, hey, Touji, are you alright?"

"What do you mean, alright?"

"Uh, you aren't drunk, right.....?"

"Me?" Touji frowned, replying to Harutora's anxious question. "Don't look down on me, Harutora. I once drank a whole bottle of vodka in one night, this much alcohol won't be enough to get me drunk."

"I, I see, that's good....."

"But, I really did get dead drunk back then. When I woke up, I noticed that the people who were drinking with me were all lying on the floor covered with blood and bruises. They even said that they would die before drinking with me again....."

"Okay! Give me the cup right now and close the bottle! It's time to go to the bathroom and vomit up everything you've drank!"

Looking carefully, he could notice that Touji was staring at Harutora with a dazed expression, an inauspicious light in his gaze. Even he himself hadn't noticed.

"Really, don't go too far, you guys! I'm ordering you guys to water it down, I'm going to go downstairs to get some water right now....."

As he said this, Harutora took the teapot and stood up. However--

"No, Harutora! What kind of shikigami dares to leave his master!"

"That's right, Harutora! To think you planned on sneakily eating all the crab by yourself!"

"Too far..... It's too far, Harutora-kun..... Don't throw us away....."

Kyouko got angry, Tenma sobbed, and Natsume grabbed Harutora's leg, making him almost fall into the nabe.

"Th, That's dangerous, Natsume! Let me go!"

"No! I don't want to let go."

"Stop grabbing, are you a little kid?"

"I say, Harutora, why are you trying to be a good boy by yourself? It looks like you haven't drank enough, right?"

"Stop making trouble!"

".....Cunning..... Harutora-kun..... You're too sly, getting us this drunk....."

"You got drunk yourselves--! Uwah!"

Natsume had originally grabbed on to Harutora's leg, then she put her hands on his waist as if she wanted to climb up, leaning her entire body onto him. Harutora was pushed up next to the nabe, and Kyouko and Tenma immediately encircled him.

"Harutora! To think you would ignore me and push over Natsume-kun! I'll take a picture and sell it to Fujino-san!"

"Don't say such scary thing! Also, what are you angry about? And why are you mad at me?"

"......Harutora-kun and the others get along so well....."

"I'm not someone to be envied right now, Tenma!"

"Ah~ Harutora's scent....."

"You too, Natsume! You're not Hokuto, don't randomly smell others!"

"Hokuto's my shikigami, I'm a master, not a shikigami~"

"No, I wasn't talking about that Hokuto..... Ahh, let go, stop grabbing me!"

Harutora struggled to push her, but Natsume grabbed on to him tightly without letting go, even laughing "hahaha....." as she got carried away, continuously rubbing him with her cheek. If somehow she remembered what she had done after she sobered up, she definitely wouldn't dare show her face before him for a long time.

Upon seeing Natsume like this, Kyouko pouted angrily, pulling Natsume's uniform in hopes that she would come over to her.

Touji, still drinking, took this time to suddenly smile bitterly for some reason and say: "Oh my..... How unfortunate, Natsume." Of course, neither Harutora nor Natsume had the leisure to listen to what Touji said.

"Harutora~ Harutora~"

"Stop singing, let me go!"

"......Uh? I'm not feeling so good all of a sudden..... I want to throw up?"

"Throwing up right after making a fuss? You really are a terrible drunk!"

Harutora really wanted to cry, and he truly wept several manly tears.

"How did this happen! The nice nabe was completely destroyed, have mercy on me....." Harutora couldn't conceal his irritation.

Just as he was secretly lamenting to himself, a certain matter shocked him and he suddenly raised his head.

"Th, That's weird, Tenma?"

Harutora became aware that Tenma had quieted down and only then realized that he was sitting on the ground with his eyes closed, his head swaying left and right. Harutora had a flash of inspiration upon seeing Tenma like that.

"R, Right, it would be a lot easier if everyone just drank until they passed out....."

Never mind Touji for now, Natsume and Kyouko had long since drank themselves silly. Even if he didn't mind them, they would pass out sooner or later. Everything would be resolved if he just had them drink themselves unconscious.

"Okay, I know, Natsume. I won't leave, so let me go." Harutora pulled off Natsume's hand, sitting cross-legged on the tatami and facing the blurry-eyed Natsume and Kyouko. "Since it's like this, let's drink to our hearts content tonight! Touji, drinks!" He raised his cup at Touji after saying this.

Touji silently poured for them and Harutora emptied his cup in a gulp.

"Ohh." Natsume and Kyouko clapped and cheered. "Don't just watch, I'll drink with you, so let's have a lot!" At Harutora's encouragement, they began drinking again.

Harutora was secretly pleased with himself.....

★

"......D, Damn, I didn't think it would be this difficult....."

"Huh.....? Hic..... What? Harutora..... hic..... What did you just say?"

'Glug, glug, glug.....' "Pwah, this bottle's done too, okay, let's drink..... sake, then....."

Natsume giggled blankly, Kyouko's entire body was limp, and Tenma had long since been sleeping soundly. Contrary to Harutora's expectations, even though the two girls were already completely drunk, they continued drinking without stopping. "......Damn, I ended up almost passing out instead....." In addition, Harutora, the so-called 'Thousand Cup Master', was still clear-headed, but he felt unstable once he stood up.

In addition, Touji had just left the room not long ago, only saying the word 'shower'. He was drunk, and though Harutora feared that he would pass out in the shower, unfortunately the current Harutora really had no time to worry about him.

"Damn, what a group of bad drunks."

Thinking carefully, Harutora hadn't actually had any experience drinking with youths of a similar age - other than Touji. His and Touji's capacities weren't bad, and it was hard to imagine this outcome.

Also, in this situation, Kyouko still didn't give up, seeming to think this was a good opportunity, approaching Natsume while saying "Ahh..... Natsume-kun, I think I'm drunk.....". Kyouko had a pure personality, and normally she definitely wouldn't do

such a thing, but her current self was like an unbridled wild horse, and everything that came from her mouth was true.

"It's alright, Kurahashi-san..... hic, Harutora also said I..... hic, was drunk." On the other hand, Natsume clung to Kyouko who had crept into her arms, rubbing her head and consoling her. Kyouko was shocked and overjoyed, her eyes reddening and her face happy. Because of various reasons, Harutora felt complex emotions upon seeing that, envying Tenma who had long since passed out.

He happened to look at the clock, noticing that the time was already very late. But even though Natsume and Touji might be alright if they dispersed right now, Kyouko and Tenma definitely wouldn't be able to go back home by themselves. There might be something he could do if it were only one person, but he feared that he wouldn't be able to make the last train if he had to split up to send the two of them home, and he had no money on him to call a taxi. What's more, Harutora didn't know where they lived at all, so this was extremely bad.

".....What should I do, we still need to go to school tomorrow....." Just as Harutora was worrying... "Mm." Tenma next to him rolled over, his face filled with happiness as he slept. Natsume and Kyouko were happily hugging each other, and Touji had left, going off alone to shower. Harutora was gloomy, only hoping that these troublemakers would kindly give him a break.

Could it possibly be that this situation would continue all the way until dawn? If it really did..... then he was helpless to stop it. No one could resolve this alone.

Harutora desperately hoped for countermeasures to resolve the crisis before him. "Ahh!" Just then, Natsume suddenly stood up, and Kyouko who had been leaning against her cried out and fell backwards on the tatami, but she didn't even glance at her.

"Oh, Oh no, Harutora! We finally had the chance to eat nabe, but I forgot about the most important -hic- thing!" She cried out, immediately rushing out of Harutora's room. That action greatly surprised Harutora, and he wasn't even in time to speak up to stop her.

".....Wh, What is it? What is it this time?"

Harutora was alarmed. A while later, Natsume rushed back into Harutora's room at the same speed.

Her hair was messy, but her eyes were glowing. She held a book in her hands. It looked like she had rushed into her own room to get this book.

It was a book of magic.

Harutora didn't know what kind of a magic book that was, but he had a bad premonition when a magic book appeared in this kind of situation.

"H, Hold on, Natsume! What are you planning on--~"

Harutora's face paled and he tried to stop Natsume, but unfortunately he was too late.

Natsume slowly drew out a charm.

"Unbounded night, infinite darkness, block the light and let darkness descend, Order!"

In the blink of an eye, there was only blackness before Harutora's eyes.

Kyouko screamed shrilly, and Tenma suddenly raised his head upon hearing that - Of course, Harutora didn't see this. He couldn't see anything at all, and for a while he even couldn't tell whether his eyes were opened or not.

"N, Natsume, what are you doing?"

"Dark nabe."

"I knew that was it, damn!"

"I hate this! I can't see! Natsume-kun, where are you?"

"......Ugh, it's so dark. Right, I was sleeping, so there's nothing wrong with that. Good night....."

Harutora stood up, wanting to walk over in Natsume's direction, but Kyouko suddenly crashed into him and they both fell over. In addition, he accidentally stepped on Tenma while tumbling over, making the sleeping Tenma moan.

"I really -hic- looked forward to dark nabe, it seems really -hic- interesting." Natsume spoke drunkenly in the darkness, but no one in the room was in a mood to listen to her feelings. No one looked at her, or more accurately, no one could see her.

"This is bad! Natsume, release that magic!"

"Huh? Is that -hic- Harutora's voice! Don't worry, the magic will release itself in a while."

"How long is a while!"

"I don't know?"

"What do you mean, you don't know!"

"The morning?"

"We have to wait until the morning!? And you're too uncertain!" Harutora groaned bitterly, despairing deeply. However, everyone in the room was panicked, not just Harutora.

"N, Natsume-kun! Natsume-kun, where are you?"

"Th, That's weird? Who is this? Who's hugging me - it hurts!"

"Isn't this Tenma!? I was looking for Natsume-kun - Yah! So cold! What idiot put a cup here!"

"It hurts..... This is my first time having a painful dream....."

"Hahaha, it's so fun..... hic..... uh..... Hey, Harutora? what do we -hic- do after dark nabe?"

Screams, angry shouts, and exclamations resounded in the impenetrable darkness, but Harutora no longer had anything to say. "H-H, Harutora-sama? May I ask....." Just then, he heard a child's voice in the darkness, and simultaneously he felt something fluffy moving next to him. He quickly came to his senses, a hopeful light momentarily flashing in his eyes.

"Kon! Right! You're here too!"

Harutora's shikigami, Kon, had been the one speaking. Though he couldn't see her, that fluffy moving object just now should have been Kon's tail. It seemed that she had been unable to keep watching as her master fell into a crisis, so she had purposefully materialized herself.

"Kon? Can you see?"

"Yes."

"Great! Can you destroy this magic?"

"I-I, I am afraid I cannot....."

"Tch, alright, nothing we can do. Then - Ah, the stove! First turn the stove off!"

"A, As you command."

Click. The sound of the gas-powered stove being turned off sounded immediately.

This ordinary action of turning off the stove brought Harutora an inexplicably great feeling of relief. He had never thought that losing his vision would be such a terrifying thing, but he was practically fighting for his life in this current situation where he was stuck in the 'dark nabe',

"Damn..... I'm also pretty drunk, I can't think well....."

"Natsume-kun~ Where are you~"

"Hey, Kyouko, don't use that kind of sad voice! Also, stop thrashing around, you might kick something!"

"Umm..... Can I keep sleeping? Or....."

"Go to sleep! In this kind of time, it would be best for you to sleep, Tenma. Right, Natsume? What kind of magic is this exactly?"

"Hmm? What does that mean?"

"Does this magic just make the room dark? If that's the case, we should evacuate outside....."

"Ahh, it's no use -hic-, this magic doesn't target an area, it covers peoples' vision -hic-.

"You're really troublesome!"

In that case, it would be more dangerous to go outside and safer to stay in the room.

"H-H, Harutora-sama, I shall first put away the pot and utensils."

"Oh, okay, thanks for your help."

"Huh? Harutora, why are you -hic- putting things away? What about the dark nabe?"

"We can't even see, what kind of nabe do you want to eat!?"

"Ugh..... boring....."

"Shut up! Also, sit down!"

Harutora barked, hearing Natsume's muttered grumbling coming from the other side of the darkness. But, she seemed to actually sit down obediently after hearing that, as he could hear the sound of someone sitting on the tatami from her direction.

"What should we do now..... Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma are all like that..... Ah, right! Touji. That person isn't affected by the magic! Kon, go call Touji to come over."

Harutora thought of something else he could do, immediately ordering his shikigami. Kon instantly replied: "A-A-As you command." Then, the sound of the door opening came through the room.

Touji had already been drunk when he had walked out of the room, but since he had taken a shower, his drunkenness had definitely receded quite a bit.

Kon's presence disappeared, only leaving Harutora and the others surrounded by darkness.

His sense of time was paralyzed in the complete darkness. "None of you move." Harutora ordered forcefully, fretfully waiting for Kon to bring Touji into the room.

A while later--

"H-H-Harutora-sama."

"Kon! What about Touji?"

"Yes, he is already sleeping in his room--"

"Wake him up!"

Harutora momentarily couldn't suppress his killing intent, but that was actually inevitable.

Perhaps it was the splitting headache he had from drinking too much, but that wasn't completely the effect of the alcohol.

Whatever, I don't care. Harutora thought resignedly.

"H-Harutora-sama, if I may..... The others are all sleeping....."

"What? D, Did you say they're sleeping?"

After hearing Kon say this, Harutora hastily perked his ears up in the darkness. After hearing that, he noticed that Natsume and Kyouko's voices had indeed vanished. In addition, when he listened carefully, he could even hear snores - snores that didn't come from Tenma.

One of them came from Kyouko's direction, and the other murmuring sound was definitely Natsume. It seemed that they had quieted down because of the darkness and had suddenly been attacked by sleepiness. Harutora was first stunned, and then he collapsed to the tatami, his whole body limp.

"......Now it's going to be like this until morning....."

They had to go to class like normal tomorrow morning, but right now he couldn't wake up Kyouko and Tenma to tell them to go back home.

"I just wanted to eat nabe..... Why did it become like this....."

Resentment tortured Harutora, but he couldn't do anything about it. In that case, he could only leave things as they were for today.

"......I guess I'll sleep too."

As Harutora's wariness relaxed, Natsume suddenly breathed deeply--

"...Harutora, you can't be picky..."

She sleeptalked with her original high-pitched voice, scaring Harutora half to death. "Nnn." After calling out, she breathed out in satisfaction, rolling over - at least, she seemed to have rolled over.

"......Huh, what was that?"

"......That's weird? Whose voice was that?'

Kyouko and Tenma moved slightly in the darkness, asking in sleepy, muffled voices.

Harutora gasped, and then spoke resignedly: "......It's me."

"......What..... So it was Harutora."

"......Haha, Harutora-kun, your voice is high-pitched like a girl's....."

Kyouko and Tenma fell silent again after speaking. After a very long - at least, it felt very long to Harutora - silence, the two of them began snoring again.

After confirming that the two of them were asleep, he called out: "......Kon."

"Yes."

"Cover them with blankets."

"A, As you command."

Kon floated lightly in midair, opening the closet door and taking out the blankets inside. Her movements were as light as possible to keep from waking any of the others.

After hearing her quiet voice, Harutora let out a sigh from the depths of his body, muttering pathetically: "I'm so hungry....."

The next morning, Fujino who had returned to the dorm didn't dare believe the scene before her eyes.

"......H, H, Harutora.....kun?"

"......Hmm? Oh, it's Fujino-san..... Morning....."

Just as Fujino walked to the second floor of the dorm, planning to open the windows in the corridor, she saw Harutora walk out of his own room, carrying the deeply sleeping Natsume.

"Uh..... H-H-Harutora-kun..... N-Natsume-kun is..... Uh....."

"Ahh, sorry, this idiot was sleeping in my room for the whole night."

".....Your r-room..... for the whole night....."

Fujino's heartbeat accelerated. Harutora, who would normally frantically make excuses for himself, wasn't like normal for some reason, and his attitude was clearly calm and composed - it seemed that he had resigned himself to his fate. He stared at Fujino.

"I'm having him go back to his room to sleep. Will there be breakfast today?" He spoke casually.

"Yes....."

"Okay, then I'll see you in a bit."

After saying this, Harutora walked into Natsume's room, carrying her as she muttered sleeptalk and leaned her head into his chest. His casual, fearless, and leisurely attitude made Fujino's body quiver, and she stood frozen in place for a while.

She swallowed.

"This..... does this mean..... they've advanced to the adult stage?"

For some reason, the dorm had red bean rice for breakfast that morning. Harutora's prediction had become true, last night really had been a terrible winter feast.

Story 3 - The Tail of Duty

Tsuchimikado Harutora liked animals.

He liked dogs, he liked cats, and he didn't just like those, he had also raised rabbits and hamsters. Basically, he liked any animal as long as it had fluffy fur.

However, he was currently studying at the Tokyo Onmyou Academy and lived in the dorm. The dorm forbid pets, nor did he have any friends around him raising pets. In other words, there were no animals currently around whose fur he could touch freely.

But.....

Whether good fortune or bad, the child defensive shikigami under Harutora's hand had a pair of fluffy ears and a fluffy tail.

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During lunchtime, Harutora sat blankly in a classroom chair in the academy building of the Onmyou Academy, an Onmyouji cultivation facility.

He had already eaten lunch in the academy cafeteria, and since he had nothing to do, he had returned to the classroom and was spacing out before the afternoon classes.

But.....

"....."

"....."!"

"....."

".....Ah!"

There was a furred object lying on Harutora's table. That fluffy thing looked like an animal-fur scarf. Harutora leisurely looked up at the sky, not paying attention to the thing on the table, but his hand unconsciously played with it.

Every time his hand rubbed that thing, a nasal childlike gasp would come from somewhere. No, it wasn't just a voice. Every time his hand moved, that thing would tremble as if it were itchy - or as if it were holding something in.

Harutora's hand rubbed--

"......Nn....."

Harutora's hand grabbed--

"......Uh.....!"

Harutora's fingertips swept across lightly--

"......Ah....."

"Harutora!"

A sudden angry shout made Harutora cry out in surprise, and he jumped up from his seat.

He turned around to look. Standing there was his classmate and childhood friend, as well as his master, Tsuchimikado Natsume. Her head of black hair was tied with a ribbon, and she looked like a pretty, androgynous youth - but actually, she was a girl obeying 'family tradition' and posing as a male.

For some reason, Natsume's body was shaking in anger, and she glared at Harutora with narrowed eyes. Behind her was their buddy Ato Touji. His hands were stuck in his pockets, watching Harutora with a merry smile.

Harutora frowned and looked back at the two.

"Wh, What is it, Natsume? And Touji too. Why did you suddenly shout out--"

"Shut up, Bakatora. Exactly how long are you planning on holding onto that thing for!"

Natsume interrupted Harutora's question, pointing upsettedly at the thing in his hands and yelling so loudly that saliva flew. "Uwah." Harutora's heart leaped and he moved his gaze to his hands, hastily letting go of the thing in his hands.

He had just been continuously unconsciously touching - a tail.

At some time, the tail's master had released her invisibility, and she kneeled on the table facing Harutora. She was a young girl whose age looked to be at most about that of an elementary schooler. She wore a suikan and hakama, with neatly combed hair, very much resembling a Japanese doll. But, her eyes were bright blue, a leaf-shaped tail grew out from behind her back, and a pair of pointed ears sprouted from her head.

She was Harutora's shikigami, Kon.

"......Ahem." With grand movements, Kon gently swayed the tail that Harutora had released and coughed lightly, turning her body to face Harutora and the others while keeping her kneeling posture and sitting on the table.

"Oops, was I touching your tail again? Sorry."

"......Y, You need not apologize....."

Ahaha. Facing Harutora, who tried to gloss over things with a laugh, Kon replied that she didn't mind. On her childish face, a faint red tint had even emerged on her cheeks and the corners of her eyes.

On the other hand, Natsume turned supercilious, glaring huffily at the master and servant pair.

"Don't think you can pass things over like that. Kon was even crying out, why didn't you notice earlier?"

"That was because..... I was spacing out....."

"Really....." Natsume murmured, her tone filled with suspicion. It seemed that she didn't trust the excuse that Harutora had found.

"Harutora, it seems like recently you're always unconsciously touching Kon's tail..... Could it actually be on purpose.....?"

"N, No way! But I haven't touched a cat or animal in forever, so occasionally I want to touch one....."

Harutora scratched his head embarrassedly, but that made Natsume take a disdainful expression instead.

"That's ridiculous..... Listen, Harutora. In the Onmyou Academy, there are very few first-years who use defensive shikigami. In other words, you and Kon are centers of attention here. In order not to shame the Tsuchimikado family name, you have to treat your shikigami in a prudent manner, understood?"

"Oh....."

Harutora nodded, his attitude not seeming too reliable. Natsume furrowed her brows angrily again.

".....And Kon, you too. I warned you many times, don't do that kind of vulgar action again. It's true that you're a shikigami, but you're still a girl..... You have to be prudent in your words and manners." Natsume didn't forget to admonish Kon too.

".....Pardon my forwardness....." However, unlike her master, this shikigami seemed opposed, replying in a calm manner.

"Since the master requests, the shikigami must do as much as possible."

"H, Harutora didn't bring up that kind of request."

"My master need not take the trouble to speak for this. Once my tail is next to him, Harutora-sama will always touch it vigorously." After saying that, Kon turned her head, waving her tail provocatively. The tail twined around her body, covering her mouth. Then, she glanced at Natsume like that, with her tail covering her mouth.

"It is fortunate that Harutora-sama enjoys my tail..... I am not shameless, but I am willing to accept Harutora-sama's love if it will fill the void in his heart....."

"What did you say.....!"

Kon curled her tail, pretending that she hadn't seen Natsume shaking in anger. She always spoke in a stammer in front of Harutora, but once she encountered someone other than Harutora, her attitude would immediately become disdainful. The tone she spoke with and the gaze she looked at Natsume with all gave off a heightened feeling of superiority.

Natsume gritted her teeth fiercely, glaring angrily at Kon. Touji, who was spectating the fight, made no attempt to hide the wry smile on his face.

"In any case, you should be a bit careful. Don't play with a little girl in public or you might be taken for a criminal. Though, that kind of action is a crime in the first place."

"Touji! Mind your choice of language a little!"

"It is as Harutora-sama says. As a shikigami, there is no need to worry about unscrupulous touching--"

"Kon! The way you talk about it makes it sound worse and worse!" Harutora hastily cried out. "H-H-However....." Kon managed to talk back. "H-H-Harutora-sama, pardon my forwardness, but do you not desire contact with animals?"

"Th, That's true....."

"I-In that case, although I cannot help much, it t-truly saddens me to see you so concerned about others....."

"Uh, really? But....."

"I-If you detest the gaze of others, you can enjoy it alone and unobserved in your bedroom--"

"Kon!"

Harutora and Natsume shouted in unison, and Touji helplessly shrugged his shoulders.

★

This incident happened after school the next day.

"That idiot..... Bakatora!"

"Uwah--, oh no, I accidentally.....!"

Harutora had again started touching Kon's tail unconsciously. Natsume's roar made him hastily let go in surprise.

Harutora and the others were currently in the cafeteria of the male dorm. Fortunately, there were no other dorm students in the cafeteria. Harutora relaxed his breath. Kon kneeled on the table next to him, coughing clearly and casually, but Natsume stared at Harutora with a cold gaze.

".....There's clearly something wrong with your actions. Could it be that you like tails that much, Harutora?"

"S, Sorry, it really wasn't on purpose..... Also, really, why didn't you speak up, Kon?"

"It doesn't matter, Harutora-sama..... It is just skin contact..."

The kitsune shikigami had no remorse, like always. The expression on Harutora's face became even more helpless.

".....Yeah, this really isn't anything good. Those mysterious rumors finally stopped spreading in the class, but now I might be suspected again....."

Just because of Kon's outer appearance, Harutora often suffered ridicule and cynicism from those around him. Though it wouldn't reach the skin contact that Kon had talked about, if he got too much into touching her, it might lead to more unnecessary misunderstandings.

"I need to be a bit more careful..... Huh? Natsume, what kind of thing are you holding?" Harutora asked as if he had only just noticed that Natsume, who had walked into the cafeteria, was holding a small cardboard box in her arms.

Natsume wordlessly put the box in front of Harutora. The box had no lid, and Harutora leaned forward, looking into the box.

"Ah." Then, he exclaimed. There was a cat in the box.

The bottom of the box was covered with a towel, and a kitten lay curled up on the towel, sleeping deeply.

It was a small black cat, black as ink from head to tail. It had a small body and didn't seem half a year old yet. Kon, who had also leaned forward, also had a surprised expression, an exclamation also coming from her mouth.

"Wh, What's up with this?"

".....Someone put a cat next to the dorm."

"An abandoned cat? But, why would you....."

"We'll temporarily be taking care of it."

"What do you mean, taking care?" Harutora asked back, his face dumbfounded. The expression on Natsume's face was clearly a bit pleased.

"Fujino-san is helping to find a new owner for this case. She asked us to help take care of it until she finds an owner."

"Us? Why?"

Natsume scolded him with an "idiot" as her childhood friend asked so seriously, giving him the natural answer.

"Didn't you say you wanted to feel a cat or dog?"

"I, I did say that..... But raising a cat is really difficult, especially since I have to go to class during the day....."

"You don't need to worry about that, I'll make a simple shikigami to help look after it. In other words, we'll leave the day up to the simple shikigami, and you'll handle taking care of the kitten when you return to the dorm after class." Natsume spoke readily.

Harutora, who had felt confused at first, took some time and finally understood the situation. His eyes glowed.

"I get it, so you're leaving it up to me to take care of it tonight, right?"

"Right. I already bought cat food from the convenience store, here." After saying that, Natsume gave the cardboard box to Harutora, putting cans of cat food on the table.

Harutora stared intently at the sleeping kitten in admiration.

"Is this a male or a female?"

"Female, it seems."

"Name?"

"We haven't made one. It's better to wait until we find an owner and let the owner decide that kind of thing later."

"That's true. She's black all over, so why don't we call her Kuro for now."

"......Your names are always so straightforward."

Natsume smiled wryly and murmured. The kitten was the only thing on Harutora's mind.

During the lull, Natsume happened to look at Kon who was next to Harutora. The moment their gazes met, "......Ha." She laughed lightly, seeming very pleased, and Kon's ears twitched sharply.

"......May I ask what is the matter, Natsume-sama?"

"......No, nothing."

Natsume smiled lightly and Kon's ears constantly twitched.

The gazes of his childhood friend and his shikigami met and gave off intense sparks - of course, Harutora didn't notice this abnormality at all.

"Harutora, the rest is up to you. Remember to 'love' it properly." After saying that, Natsume immediately left the cafeteria.

Harutora excitedly replied: "Yeah!", his gaze never leaving the kitten. On the contrary, Kon furrowed her brows, vexedly watching Natsume's back as she left.

"This cat really can sleep."

"......Yes."

"Isn't it hungry?"

"......I, I am not sure....."

Kon kneeled properly on the table, respectfully replying to her master who only had the kitten on his mind, her gaze often glancing at her master's face.

"H-Harutora-sama, do you like cats?'

"Me? Of course I don't hate them."

"I, I see..... Th-Then, compared to dogs....."

"Yeah, I like them both."

"I-I-I see, I see..... Th-Then as for foxes....."

"Ah, it's awake!"

Kon mustered her courage and was about to ask her question when the originally soundly sleeping kitten opened its eyes at once.

"Ohh, its eyes are so big."

The kitten's eyes were opened surprisingly wide. It looked at Harutora, then it stared at him without glancing away or blinking, as if its body were frozen.

"Huh, what's going on, could it be that it's scared of me?"

"B-But it is just a kitten, so it will not get close to humans--"

"Come here, you don't need to be scared, I'm not a bad person~"

"H-Harutora-sama? You really don't need to ingratiate yourself--"

Harutora reached his index finger out towards the kitten's nose, moving it lightly a few times. The kitten moved over upon seeing that, repeatedly sniffing the scent from his finger. Then, it raised its head to look at Harutora, softly mewing: "Meow."

"Wah." At the same time as Harutora's mouth split into a grin, "Hmph." Kon puffed up her cheeks.

The kitten called out, taking the initiative to get close to Harutora, using its head to touch his hand with somewhat clumsy movements. Kon bared her teeth out of anger at this kitten's fearless attitude, but Harutora was extremely excited.

"Kon, look, it's suddenly sticking to me!"

"......Th, That is true, Harutora-sama is incredible, as expected....."

"Come here."

"Ah, t-t-to think..... you would put it on your lap.....!"

Harutora took the kitten from the cardboard box, putting it on his lap.

At first the kitten had seemed panicked, and once it sat on Harutora's lap, its body went stiff again. "Huh, what's wrong?" Harutora stroked it gently, and Kon waved her tail, seeming abnormally fretful.

"What is it, are you cold?"

"T-T-To be in Harutora-sama's lap and call it cold is far too arrogant.....!"

"But you should be able to relax a bit now, right?"

"T-T-To be in Harutora-sama's lap and be that comfortable is too presumptuous.....!"

"Ah, it's moving, haha, how cute."

"....."

Kon twisted her tail like she was forcefully wringing a towel.

On the other hand, the kitten sitting in Harutora's lap became more and more relaxed, mewing out softly towards Harutora. "Come, come." Harutora also grinned, extending his fingers to play with the kitten.

"....." Kon was listless for a while, but then she immediately reinvigorated herself, feigning calm and swishing her tail grandly, making it wave here and there.

".....P, P-P, P-P-Perhaps a young cat whose fur has not yet grown is cute, but considering what it feels like, it doesn't compare to....."

"Okay, I'll bring you back to my room."

"Ah, H-Harutora-sama....."

"Kon."

"Yes."

"Help me bring the box and the cat food back."

"A, As you command....."

Harutora left the dorm cafeteria holding the small cat, walking joyfully without even looking at Kon.

Kon's tail drooped in dejection and she sat on the table for a while. Not long afterwards, she slowly put the canned cat food into the cardboard box, then carried the box with both hands, jumping off from the table.

".....H-Harutora-sama really treats animals gently, ah, ahaha....." She showed a smile, muttering as if she did not mind and chasing after Harutora with quick steps.

★

"A cat? Doesn't our dorm ban pets?"

"Well....."

Harutora joyfully explained what had happened yesterday night to the puzzled and wondering Touji.

Because they hadn't seen each other in the cafeteria this morning, he hadn't had the opportunity to mention the cat to Touji. Harutora could only take advantage of the time before the first class started to explain. Touji seemed not very interested in the contents of his explanation, staring at him with a suspicious gaze as he spoke.

"A kitten, huh?" Touji twisted his mouth in mocking after hearing Harutora's explanation. "I wouldn't do something as tiring as looking after a cat."

"Taking care of it isn't tiring at all, actually. That cat sticks to me a lot."

"Isn't taking care of a cat that sticks to you just as troublesome?"

"No, it really listens to me! It was really obedient this morning, as if it noticed I was about to be late! Also, it meowed before I left like it was telling me to be careful outside!"

"That should be coincidence."

Harutora leaned across the table as he spoke, receiving Touji's rebuttal and wry smile.

"Also, could the fact that you overslept this morning have to do with the cat?"

"Yeah, because it stuck to me too much and was pestering me for the whole night wanting me to play with it and didn't let me get a good sleep."

"See, it really is troublesome."

"But I don't feel tired! On the contrary, I feel like my mood becomes happy once I see it!"

"Really? Wasn't that kitten just born a while ago? How could a kitten who was just abandoned get close to someone so easily."

"What, everything I said was true." Harutora spoke excitedly. "Right, Kon." Then, he asked for agreement from his shikigami. "Isn't that kitten very cute? It really sticks to me, right?"

As a defensive shikigami, Kon was always hiding herself around Harutora, but once Harutora called, she would immediately appear.

But, for some reason, she didn't reply when Harutora called for her.

"That's weird, Kon?" Harutora called out again.

Just then--

".....Yes."

A shikigami with fox ears and a talk appeared next to Harutora, an unusual gloomy presence radiating from her whole body.

Her ears and tail drooped listlessly, and even her fur seemed gloomy.

Harutora couldn't help but be dumbfounded, and Touji couldn't conceal his surprise either.

".....Do you have orders, Harutora-sama.....?"

"Uh, not really. B, But, what's wrong with you? Did something happen?"

".....What..... do you mean?'

"Huh? You seem..... like you don't have any energy."

After hearing Harutora say this, Kon's mouth moved slightly, smiling mournfully like a withered cactus.

".....Harutora-sama need not be concerned, I am the same as always....." Kon twisted her mouth again upon saying this, her smile lost and regretful and her gaze

blank and sluggish. In one night, her satisfied self as she let Harutora touch her tail had ceased to exist.

"......She hasn't been attacked, so what's up with the 'lag' phenomenon?" Touji said.

'Lag' mainly happened with the shikigami received external impacts, leading to an instability of their materialized form. It was a phenomenon where distortions or blurriness appeared in the external form. Simply put, Kon was currently enduring trauma equivalent to an external impact.

"......May I ask..... do you have any orders, Harutora-sama. I am Harutora-sama's faithful shikigami, so I will obey to the fullest of my ability and fulfill Harutora-sama's requests....."

"A-Actually, there's nothing big..... Anyway, Kon, why does it seem like the tone you're speaking with is a bit resigned?"

"It is nothing..... Please command me as you will, Harutora-sama."

"Uh, it really isn't anything important... It's just Kuro. It seems to really stick to me, right? I just wanted to ask you to tell Touji that." Harutora spoke with a bit of apprehension.

Kon's mouth twisted again upon hearing that.

However, her smile this time was different from before. It wasn't sorrowful, but disdainful instead. Though it was fleeting, she had already clearly shown - Yes yes, that's right, I know your heart only has that little thing, I know, anyways - that sort of helpless atmosphere.

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says, that cat is quite, extremely, abnormally close to Harutora-sama." Kon replied.

"Right? Touji, that's what I said. Also, Kon, isn't that thing very cute?"

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says, that cat is extremely cute, nothing has such flattering wiles as it."

Kon kneeled properly with her back straight, chanting words that echoed her master. She looked empty, her expression dim, and she often waved her tail like a disgruntled child with a temper.

Hearing their conversation - actually, noticing the attitudes of this master-servant pair, Touji showed an insightful expression, casually saying: "......Ah..... Don't involve me about that kind of thing, it's really too troublesome....."

"Huh, weren't you listening, didn't I just say it wasn't troublesome? Right, Kon?"

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says....."

"It's really very cute, it wasn't willing to get close to me at the start, but later it started sticking to me and refused to leave--"

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says....."

"And it was mewing for the whole night, trying to get me to pamper it."

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says....."

"Once it finds an opportunity, it runs over to play with me, and it always licks my face, it's so bothersome."

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says....."

"......Harutora, stop talking."

"Huh, why?"

"You don't need to say anything more."

"Yes, Harutora-sama. It is as Harutora-sama says....."

Kon repeated the same sentence, and Touji sighed deeply.

"......Never mind that, Natsume's move worked. It seems like your desire for animals is satisfied."

"Haha, that's right. I just need to think of seeing Kuro when I go back to the dorm and I naturally won't touch Kon's tail anymore - Kon, I'm really sorry for doing that to you before."

".....You need not apologize....."

The atmosphere surrounding Kon became heavier and heavier, and Kon sounded like she was muffled by the atmosphere.

Harutora's words seemed to have given her the finishing blow. Her figure began slowly vanishing as she hid herself of her own accord without waiting for her master's approval.

However, just then - "But, Kon's tail is still the fluffiest, it feels the best." Once those words were uttered, Kon's dead and soulless eyes instantly widened.

"H, H-H-H, Harutora, Harutora-sama! Is that true?"

"Huh, of course, it's completely different....."

The master was confused by his shikigami's abrupt change in attitude, but he still nodded.

Kon unconsciously turned around, tightly clenching her fists. One could almost hear her cheering loudly inside her heart.

"E-E-Exactly so! Though Kuro is cute, unfortunately it is a just-born kitten! Its fur is merely mediocre - not worth mentioning."

"Yeah, that's right....."

Harutora was taken aback by Kon's momentum, nodding again. Kon straightened her ears and tail, looking ready as if in a competition that had been tied at the last minute and was entering overtime.

Touji smiled wryly, his expression complex. "......So." He scratched his bandanna that was like his trademark. "Before you find an owner, you're temporarily taking care of that cat? What's it doing now? Did you leave the cat in your room?"

"Right, but I didn't just leave it in my room alone, the simple shikigami Natsume made should be helping to look after it..... Ah, maybe we can figure out what it's doing right now. Is Natsume in the classroom?"

"How could she be late..... But come to think of it, I didn't see her in the dorm cafeteria today either."

Harutora and Touji looked towards the classroom, quickly spotting Natsume's figure in a seat near the window.

But, she looked strange. Her head swayed back and forth, as if she were sleeping in her seat.

"Huh? Is Natsume sleeping?"

"How curious."

The two of them glanced at each other, standing up and walking towards Natsume's seat.

"Natsume."

Natsume immediately woke up when Harutora called out.

"Huh? Ah, H-Harutora-kun--?"

She unconsciously let out her high-pitched girl's voice and hastily concealed it. She looked at Harutora from her seat, a blush emerging on her face.

"Natsume, are you alright?'

"I, I'm fine, I just accidentally fell asleep.....!" She lowered her head, replying bashfully. She said she was fine, but her actions were very suspicious.

"That's weird, you're the same as Harutora. Why do neither of you have enough sleep today?"

"Th-Th-Th-That has nothing to do with Harutora." Flustered after hearing Touji's remark, Natsume immediately rebuked him, clearly panicked and angry.

"I slept very late last night to make the shikigami that would look after the cat!"

"Right, Natsume, I came to ask you about that. Can you figure out what Kuro's doing right now?'

"I-It doesn't have that function since it was a rush job."

"Huh? But you said you worked until very late....."

Harutora didn't understand. Just then, the bell for class happened to ring.

"Hurry up and go back." Natsume urged them to leave, and they returned to their seats.

".....What is that girl doing?"

"Who knows?"

★

After school let out, Harutora returned to his dorm a bit late because he had to stay back to receive after-school tutoring. He was worried about Kuro, and hurried home.

The kitten lay on the sheets that Harutora hadn't made, curled up and sleeping soundly.

Harutora relaxed his breath.

"Hi, you returned really late." Touji from next door walked over. "This thing is the cat you were talking about, right? I saw it just now, it's been sleeping the whole time."

"I, I see, that's good. Natsume's attitude in the morning was very strange, so I thought there was a mistake with the simple shikigami or something."

"The shikigami was still looking after the cat when I returned to the dorm. Natsume had just taken the shikigami back. She's in her room adjusting it."

"I see, I should go properly thank her in a while." Harutora sat directly on the tatami after saying that, lightly touching the kitten's head with his fingertips.

"This thing sleeps like a pig. Do all kittens sleep like that?" Touji spoke with his arms crossed.

"It's because she played around too much last night."

"Oh..... But it seems like there's no toys a cat could play with in this room."

"It's a bit different from other cats, it doesn't like playing with balls and wool, and it only likes climbing on me."

"It would be nice if you were that well-liked by girls."

"I'd rather be well-liked by cats."

Harutora replied leisurely to Touji's teasing.

Maybe hearing the chatting of the two, the kitten woke up. It looked at Harutora, meowing flightily and played with the finger stroking its head.

"Oh, you woke up, you little thing~"

Harutora joyfully tickled the kitten and the kitten frolicked happily. A merry scene unfolded.

"So this is how it was. No wonder the little fox was so jealous." Touji laughed quietly as he spoke.

"H-H-Harutora-sama." Just then, Kon suddenly appeared next to Harutora, her immature face unusually severe, as if making her decision to go on the offensive.

"What is it?" Harutora asked. Kon breathed deeply.

"I-I-If I may be so presumptuous, I believe it is inappropriate to let someone unfamiliar climb on Harutora-sama's bed--!"

"What's wrong, Kon, why are you suddenly saying that kind of thing. I can't do anything about it either, Kuro jumps in right when I go to bed....."

"M-M-My point is, letting this cunning - No, you should not spoil it so much, th-this cat is just an animal! H-H-Harutora-sama, please reconsider--!"

Her breathing was erratic as she raised opposition. It seemed that she had accumulated quite a lot of depression just from yesterday night.

"It's true that it would be troublesome if fleas got into the sheets. You should at least help it bathe." Touji proposed casually.

"Gyah!" Kon cried out, her face pale as if the opponents had kicked in the winning ball. "That's true." Harutora nodded his head in agreement.

"In that case, it's decided to have it bathe as soon as possible. Touji, want in?"

"I'll go after I eat."

"Okay, then I'll head out first--"

"P-P-Please wait!"

Just as Harutora was picking up the kitten, Kon quickly grabbed his leg, stopping him from moving.

"B-B-Bathe! B-Bathe? Y-You're going to b-bathe with that?"

"Right."

"T-To think you are so forward?" Kon's tail trembled because of the great shock. "N-N-N-Not only do you share the same bed, you even bathe together? H-Harutora-sama, what drives you so far?"

"It's just helping a cat to bathe, you don't need to be that shocked."

"This is an important matter! I-I still hoped to..... Ah, no! Please don't misunderstand, Uh..... H-Harutora-sama needn't be bothered, please allow me to wash the cat.....!"

"It's alright, I helped cats bathe before."

Harutora's attitude was casual, strongly contrasting with the panicked shikigami. Incidentally, as a defensive shikigami, Kon was always around Harutora, and Harutora only ordered her not to enter when he was in the showers or bathroom.

".....That's weird? What's up with her, why's she suddenly so stiff?"

Harutora blinked, staring at the kitten he held in his chest. When the kitten who had been playing so happily at first heard about bathing, its body had instantly frozen.

"Oh my, maybe it knows it's about to take a bath?'

"Don't get scratched."

"Yeah, but at the start it was like this even when I held it, so it should get used to bathing before long, right?"

Harutora spoke relaxedly, walking out of the room while carrying the kitten. Touji left with him, and only the devastated Kon was left in the room.

".....I, In that case....."

★

The dorm was furnished with showers and a large bathhouse. Natsume, who was posing as a male, used single shower stalls, but Harutora used the bathhouse.

"Damn, there are so many people." He walked into the changing room while smiling wryly, quickly taking off his clothes.

As he unclothed, the originally frozen kitten suddenly lost its calm, turning around in place and obviously a bit panicked. In this case, it would be best to finish quickly, Harutora thought. He carried the kitten by the neck with one hand and walked towards the bath.

The bath was filled with steam. The kitten wailed.

"Yo, Tsuchimikado, you're really early today."

"Huh? What's up with the cat in your hand?"

"Sorry, I'm helping it bathe, I'll be done soon."

Harutora bowed his head and apologized to the senpais who had entered the bath ahead of him as he walked forward. The kitten being held by the neck mewed, obviously extremely terrified. Harutora chose the innermost seat in order to keep from disturbing the others.

"Alright, calm down." Harutora pressed the kitten against his bare chest. The fur on the kitten's body made him itch.

The kitten cried out strangely and even its fur stiffened. Fortunately, the kitten didn't bite or scratch, it just continually let the sound of heavy breathing.

"Don't worry, you don't need to be scared, it's just a bath."

Harutora reassured the kitten with a smile, and the rigid kitten could no longer suppress itself from trembling. He didn't get what had happened. He thought that maybe the kitten was overly tense and might have momentarily lost control.

Whatever - Harutora gave up on the thought of washing the cat. Just then--

"I-I-I-I am here!"

A young girl rushed into the bathhouse.

"H-H-Harutora-sama! Pardon me, but I have come to wash your back! Harutora-sama, where are you!"

That girl was Kon.

The sleeves of her suikan had been tied up with cord and a towel was wrapped around her head. She wasn't wearing shoes, but held tightly onto a sponge and soap.

The interior of the bath went silent for a while.

Then, the guys' exclamations began to sound, instantly reverberating throughout the bathhouse.

"Tch! Kon! What are you doing here?"

Harutora called out, stunned, but the other guys shouted roughly one by one, covering his voice. But Kon's tolerance also had limits. Her blue eyes were wide, especially since - though the private areas were covered with towels - this place was the male bathhouse, after all.

"Hey, d-don't block the way! H-H-Harutora-sama! Harutora-sama!"

Fireballs shot in all directions and shrill screams sounded everywhere in the bathhouse. The dorm students scrambled to flee the bathhouse.

Some escaped into the bath, some pointed showerheads towards the foxfire that Kon had shot out, and some threw bath water - whole buckets of it - towards the foxfire.

Mist and steam rose gently and screams filled the air. Soap bubbles and towels were everywhere.

The naked guys fled everywhere. Kon became even more panicked with the bathhouse in disarray. She was completely drenched, and the scream emitted from her mouth echoed in the bath like ultrasound.

"Kon! Stop--!"

Harutora couldn't help but stand up and the kitten took the opportunity to jump from his arm.

The kitten jumped down, reflexively turning its body and getting tangled up with the towel around Harutora's waist. It fell to the ground with the towel, sprinting straight towards the bathhouse exit, still dragging Harutora's towel.

"Ah! Kuro, don't run--!"

"Ah! Harutora-sa--"

Kon noticed Harutora, uttering a ear-piercing scream and hastily covering her eyes with her hands. Hence, the soap in her hands fell down and slid on the bathhouse tiles. In addition, the kitten, whose vision was half-obscured by the towel, ran over and just happened to stop on the soap.

The kitten instantly slipped.

"Mew!" The kitten wailed, thrashing its limbs as it slipped, perfectly colliding with the nearby Kon. The kitten reached out its claws, ferociously grabbing onto Kon's body.

There was one scream after another.

The kitten slipped and Kon also fell over. The cord on her sleeves loosened and tangled up with the towel. The cries of the kitten and Kon overlapped as their bodies tangled together. Foxfire scattered everywhere and the cries of the dorm students resounded through the bathhouse.....

".....Why.....Did it become like this....."

Dumbfounded and completely naked, Harutora looked at the scene before him.

That night, the miserable screams in the dorm bathhouse continued for almost ten minutes before Harutora forced Kon to dematerialize.

The manager Fujino lectured Harutora fiercely for a while, and his punishment was the loss of that day's dinner.

★

"I-I-I-I-I am extremely sorry.....!"

The next morning, Kon bowed her head and apologized for the trouble she had created to the students in the dorm cafeteria. In the end, she kneeled on the table, apologizing to her master Harutora.

Although Harutora was annoyed, upon seeing his shikigami with her head bowed to the table, he still helplessly said: "Anyways, things are over."

Actually, he also truly wished that he could forget that incident as soon as possible. The students who had been involved in the trouble definitely also had the same thoughts.

"It's fortunate that I didn't go bath first." Touji gloated as they ate breakfast.

"Did you hear that the cat was taken away by Natsume?"

"Right, it seems like Natsume was helping to look for an owner along with Fujino-san. After that commotion happened yesterday, she hastily thought of someone who could raise it - She took advantage of yesterday night to give the cat to the shikigami and finished the matter."

Even after that terrible commotion happened, Harutora's expression still looked a bit lonely as he explained the matter. He hadn't been able to properly say goodbye to Kuro because he had been preoccupied all the way until the middle of the night.

"But anyway, the dorm forbids pets, so it's good to quickly find an owner for it. I hope it can be happy there..... And Kon too."

"Wh-Wh-Wh-What does that mean?"

"Please let me touch your tail occasionally. Once in a while will be enough."

"H-Harutora-sama.....!"

Upon hearing her master say those words half-jokingly, tears momentarily swelled in the corners of Kon's eyes.

"But I'm a bit worried, I don't know whether Kuro was hurt or not. I feel like I saw it have 'lag' effects just like Kon at the end."

"What, did you see the cat turn transparent?"

"My eyes were probably tricking me, I'm just scared that maybe it was affected by Kon's aura. It would be best if that didn't happen." Harutora spoke worriedly.

"Idiot." Touji laughed. "That proves that you were panicked too at the time. It isn't a shikigami, how could it have 'lag'."

"E-E-Exactly, Harutora-sama. I-If that cat were a shikigami, it would not be able to deceive me!"

"Also, who would do that kind of thing? Who would be bored enough to make an abandoned cat shikigami and even make it with so much detail that none of us would notice....."

Touji, who had originally dismissed that idea, suddenly frowned after he was half-finished speaking, going silent. "What's wrong?" Harutora asked, and Kon looked at Touji with a troubled face.

Just then--

"G, G, Good morning! Harutora!"

Natsume appeared in the dorm cafeteria, greeting him.

For some reason, she was stammering just like Kon, nor did she look at Harutora when she greeted him. She turned her head to avoid Harutora's gaze. It could be seen from the side that her entire face was flushed red.

Touji's expression became even more serious since her actions were too unnatural. He stared at Natsume with a sharp gaze.

As always, Harutora completely failed to notice that Natsume's wasn't quite right. "Ah, Natsume. Sorry a lot about yesterday, I gave you so much trouble....." He felt guilty, apologizing to Natsume.

He had created a heap of trouble and had even made Natsume help him with the aftermath. Of course he had prepared himself to be scolded about 'tainting the Tsuchimikado family name'..... But strangely, Natsume didn't get angry.

"Th, There wasn't anything you could do about yesterday! Th-There was no helping it! T-To think such a thing would happen in the bathhouse, no one could expect that, s-so there was no helping it!"

"Do you think so? I'm really moved that you say that..... Ah, Kon, hurry up and apologize to Natsume!"

"A-A-As you command. I am extremely ashamed of the trouble I have stirred up....."

"It, It's alright, you don't need to feel bad about it! Let's just pretend nothing happened yesterday! It was a dream! It, It was just a dream, completely a dream from every angle.....!"

Natsume was inexplicably agitated, her gaze never turning to Harutora. Harutora didn't get what she was saying, but fortunately she seemed willing to forgive him, so he didn't ask anything more, just replying: "Oh, alright!" and nodding.

The three of them ate breakfast.

"Alright, then I'll get pumped up and do my best today as well!" Harutora said, standing up and collecting his utensils.

Kon followed behind her master, and Natsume also - her cheeks still red - stood up from her chair.

".....Natsume." In the end, Touji, who hadn't said a word after Natsume appeared, called out quietly.

"What?"

"Your tail's showing."

Natsume reflexively turned her head, looking down at her waist and unconsciously cried out lightly.

"Meow."

Story 4 - Cold Memory In Dark

So hot.

No, so cold.

His face was hot, but his body was very cold. His head was dazed with a splitting headache, and his hands were limp and powerless. He was covered with sweat, his nose was dripping, and he couldn't stop coughing.

So unlucky, the boy complained.

He had long since known that his luck was not good, and this time he had caught a cold on the day he was going to his friend's house to play. He had ridden his bicycle all the way here right after school ended on the day before the long weekend. Once he woke up, his body had become this bad. What bad luck.

He continuously coughed, blowing his nose.

If he were in his own room, at least he would have manga, and he could - behind his parents' backs - play videogames, but he was bored to tears in someone else's guest room. This house had a vast courtyard that he could play in, but there was almost nothing to do for leisure indoors.

In particular, this guest room was so large that it created anxiety. The family had brought in a heater for him, so the room wasn't cold, just boring.

He couldn't hear anything at all from the silent house even if he perked up his ears. The more he looked at the unfamiliar lines in the wood of the ceiling, the more restless he became.

Cough.

Even the light sound of coughing inexplicably lacked a sense of reality.

What bad luck, his fevered brain thought fuzzily. Suddenly, the paper door opened with a thump.

A girl walked into the room. She was this family's only daughter - the boy's childhood friend. Once he saw her walk in, the boy's face momentarily lit up.

Now he finally had someone to talk to, he thought. He had been feeling bored because sleeping by himself with a cold was lonely. Though he didn't want to spread his cold to others, if it were just a chat.....

After the girl entered the room, she silently walked next to the bed where the boy lay. The boy joyfully looked at the girl who stood beside the pillow.

However, the girl's expression was strangely gloomy as she looked at the boy.

The girl looked at the boy with a serious, solemn, and somewhat worried-looking expression, but it also had a bit of trepidation. The heap of things in the girl's hands troubled him even more.

Charms, gohei, sakaki, shimenawa, jade strung with string, a shakujou with bells on the top, a sword used in rituals, and even rosaries and vajras.

These were all 'magical tools'.

"......?"

What are you doing with those things? The boy wanted to ask, but he couldn't speak, his mouth only letting out the sound of a cough. With that cough, the girl's expression became even more solemn, and her young mouth tightened.

She nodded her head lightly as if communicating with herself, her expression solemn.

"D-D-Don't worry....."

"......?"

"I, I'll treat your cold.....!"

"..... ?"

The eyes that the girl stared at the boy with carried a firm will. The boy's gaze was confused as he blankly looked back at the girl.

It was evident how bad the boy's condition was from the fact that his instinct failed to sound the alarm.

His heart had had a bad premonition since he had that dream.

"Hi, you're early today, Harutora..... Hey, are you alright?"

The dorm students all wolfed down their breakfast in the first-floor cafeteria of the Onmyou Academy male dorm.

Ato Touji walked into the dorm cafeteria, suppressing a yawn, holding a tray of breakfast while looking for an empty seat. He noticed Tsuchimikado Harutora had started breakfast before him, which was rare.

Touji immediately furrowed his brows upon seeing Harutora.

"You look different, Harutora."

Just as Touji said, Harutora's physical condition was clearly bad. His face looked like it was fevered, his eyes were misty and clouded, his nose was red, looking like he should blow it a few times. He hadn't touched the breakfast on the table at all.

"......What? Don't speak nonsense, Touji....." Harutora scoffed. "......How could I - cough - get a cold. Cough. I'm the most proud of - cough cough - my health....."

"So idiots can get colds too." Touji replied calmly, sitting at the same table as Harutora. "You should go find the manager and ask her for cold medicine. Eat your breakfast, take medicine, and go back to your room to get some proper sleep."

"Hey, Touji, what are you going on about? I - achoo - don't have a cold - cough."

"Don't worry, not going to class for a day won't have the slightest effect on your grades at all."

"What are you joking about, I'm fine - cough cough cough!"

"Ah, look at what you're doing. Don't cough all over, it's dirty."

Harutora coughed while blowing his nose, his forehead rocking to and fro. Touji looked at his good friend, the expression on his face closer to stupor rather than worry.

It looked like Harutora's cold was quite severe, so maybe he had a high fever. In the long time he had known him, this was Touji's first time seeing Harutora like this.

"Anyway..... I'll go to class..... After all, I'm..... a member of the Tsuchimikado family.....!"

"If Natsume heard your words, she would definitely be moved to tears."

"......Also, I don't - sniff - have a cold..... I'm incredibly healthy....."

"Can that be called healthy? People say that idiots can't catch colds, but it looks like it means idiots don't notice that they have a cold." Touji spoke unforgivingly.

Just then, a student that also lived in the dorm walked into the dorm cafeteria.

It was a boy whose long black hair was tied up with a pink ribbon. But, she actually wasn't a boy, her true identity was a girl who was posing as a boy. Touji - and Harutora - knew about this matter.

Touji raised his hand slightly, calling out: "Natsume." Tsuchimikado Natsume noticed Touji, her face brightening.

But in the next second, Harutora pushed his chair back, calling out loudly and standing up. His face was hot and his attitude was clearly panicked.

"T, Touji, I'll be going first!"

"You're going?"

"Ah, help me finish this breakfast! See you!"

Harutora pushed his tray to Touji and hastily left the dorm cafeteria, coughing and blowing his nose.

Natsume, who was watching from a distance, stood still, dumbfounded. Touji, who was nearby, was also stunned.

"......What is that guy doing?" Touji looked at the tray Harutora had pushed over, not knowing what to do. The breakfast on the tray had long since become cold.

"......Therefore....."

The lecturer's hoarse voice sounded like he was chanting scriptures. It reverberated through the quiet classroom.

The most famous Onmyouji cultivation facility - the Onmyou Academy. The students who entered here to study all had goals of becoming professional Onmyouji and improving themselves every day, so they had very strict expectations of themselves and - essentially - no one would talk during class. During lectures, only the teacher's lecturing would enter their ears along with the sound of writing.

However, today another noise was mixed into the classroom.

Cough cough cough cough.....

Sniff sniff sniff..... Honk..... Sniff sniff.

The irritating sound of coughing and nose-blowing rang out continuously, sounding exceptionally grating in the quiet classroom.

The noise came from the furthest back seat in the classroom where a single person sat all alone, often letting out irritating noise. Honestly, his actions made trouble for others, and the students that had originally sat nearby had all changed seats one by one.

Even though the protesting gazes of the classmates shot towards the culprit who was making the noise, that person didn't notice, so they all turned towards his 'master'. Natsume sat in her seat, shrinking her body in embarrassment.

"......Really, what is that idiot doing....." Natsume complained to Touji who sat next to her.

"He has a cold." Touji replied casually.

The two of them sat in the center of the classroom and there was a bit of distance between them and Harutora's seat.

Though he had left the dorm first, Harutora had only entered the classroom right before the class started. He chose a seat far back as if he were avoiding the two of them, but judging from the incident in the dorm cafeteria during the morning, Harutora might be avoiding Natsume.

"......Hey, Natsume. It isn't much help to the Tsuchimikado family name if he completely disregards that kind of condition and comes to class, right?"

It could even be counterproductive. Touji glanced at Natsume. "Don't misunderstand." Natsume protested quietly.

"I didn't force him to come to class even if he had a cold. I was even surprised. I thought he would take advantage of the cold and sleep happily in the dorm....."

"Even if he didn't have a cold, he seems like the kind of person who might skip class to sleep in the dorm."

"Also, Harutora hasn't gotten a cold for many years..... What exactly is up with him?"

Natsume seemed also to be clueless. This really wasn't like something Harutora would do.

"Could it be - Could it be that he finally sees himself as a member of the Tsuchimikado family?"

"That's one hundred percent impossible."

"It, It's not completely impossible, look, it might be because he's fevered.....!"

"So his brain's gone bad from fever? That might be possible."

Touji spoke tartly. Natsume was inadvertently speaking more and more harshly as she surveyed Harutora's condition.

"......That's weird? Whose shikigami is that?" Just as they were discussing, the teacher suddenly spoke in surprise.

They looked towards the podium. There was a young girl sitting on the lectern. She was a young, kimono-wearing girl. A pair of pointed ears sprouted from her head and a leaf-shaped tail grew out from behind her back.

"Kon?"

The girl was Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon. Natsume's heart pulsed and she stood up from her seat.

Kon sat on the table and turned her head over her shoulder to look at Natsume, saying: "......Burp....."

Natsume couldn't conceal her shock.

"......What did you say? Kon?"

Kon unsteadily stood up on the lectern in front of the stunned and silent teacher and students..... Then her foot slipped and she fell down.

The normally nimble shikigami wasn't prepared and fell down headfirst. Because she looked like a little girl on the outside, the female students inadvertently screamed.

Kon, who fell onto the floor, seemed not to mind, almost as if she hadn't noticed that she had fallen.

She bent her body, standing up slowly and shakily, her movements obviously abnormal. Her steps were staggered, her hands flailed, her young face was clearly dazed, and her eyes were empty - not knowing where to look, as if she were

dreaming. Her fox ears drooped and her tail followed a strange continuous rhythm.
"......Is she drunk?" The students sitting in the front row murmured.

"Nonsense! How could I be drunk..... Burp." Kon spoke with a slur and almost none of the students felt surprised at that.

"Harutora! What are you doing?" Natsume frantically barked.

"....."

"Harutora!"

"......Huh? Oh..... It's alright..... Don't need to worry - Achoo!"

He looked extremely worrisome. Also, once he sneezed, Kon seemed to reply with a burp.

"What's going on, Natsume?"

"Harutora has a cold, putting his aura in an unstable condition. Also, shikigami like defensive shikigami and servant shikigami are directly affected by the practitioner's physical condition!"

"That's why Kon's drunk?"

"Normally one would deal with this kind of situation beforehand, but Harutora doesn't know what to do!"

As Natsume explained to Touji, Kon still swayed with stumbling steps on the podium. She swayed here and there, then suddenly noticed Harutora.

"H-H, Harutora-sama! When did you go over there!"

Unexpectedly, she took a great leap forward, stepping on the desks where books and notebooks had been placed and treading on heads that didn't evade in time, lightly dancing across the classroom.

"Hey." Harutora leaned backwards, trying to evade, but she swooped up, grabbing his neck. "Uwah..... Harutora-sama is so warm....."

She rubbed him with her cheek, her fluffy tail patting all over her master's body. Kon was a kitsune shikigami, but her presence wasn't like a fox, but rather more like a kitten.

"What are you doing! Kon! Get off, don't be rude!" Natsume rushed towards Harutora's seat with a red face. Once she got close, it was Harutora's turn to suddenly stand up.

"N, Natsume!" He breathed laboriously, pushing back his chair and backing off. Of course, Kon still tightly grabbed onto his head. He spoke with a hazy consciousness: "D, Don't be concerned about me! I'm alright! Don't worry!"

"Stop making a fuss, Harutora! How can someone not worry if you say such a thing?"

"It's really nothing! I really..... but it seems like my head's heavier compared to normal.....?"

"That's because your shikigami is sitting on your head, it has nothing to do with your cold!"

"Ha.....Harutora-sama....."

"Kon! Sober up, quickly!"

".....Nn..... It's a little hot.....?"

"If you don't like the heat then let Harutora go now.....! I, Idiot! Why are you taking off your clothes in this kind of place!"

Kon twisted her body on Harutora's head, pulling her suikan over her head and taking it off. She wiggled her tail, tickling Harutora's nose and causing Harutora to sneeze several times in succession, but he still tried to escape Natsume with a stumbling pace.

"......Hey, Natsume, what exactly did you do to Harutora?" Touji said, his expression filled with suspicion.

"How rude! I didn't do anything at all!"

"But he's clearly scared of you, right?"

"It's not my fault!"

Natsume denied it desperately. The reactions of the two led to no small commotion among the students.

Harutora was the shikigami serving Natsume, this was a well-known fact among the class's students. Moreover, Natsume normally strictly required that Harutora's actions not shame the Tsuchimikado family name, so they deeply felt the same suspicion as Touji.

"......The Spartan education was overdone....."

"......Frightening traditions of traditional families....."

"......He's saying his true feelings because of the fever....."

"I, It's nothing like that! Don't misunderstand! The Tsuchimikado family isn't the kind of traditional family you're imagining.....!'

"......Come to think of it, their relationship is really very strange....."

"......Now that you say so, there were similar rumors spread before....."

"......And don't spring and summer happen to match.....?"

"I said, you're mistaken! Why are you getting more and more outrageous! Also, what do you mean by 'spring and summer match'?"

As Natsume was flustered and defended herself to everyone, Harutora was still continuing to flee and Kon was still twisting her body and unclothing on his head.

Every one of them was bad-tempered, and the situation became harder and harder to resolve.

"I, In that case....." Natsume was forced into a corner and decided to take the opportunity to clean up this chaos early.

A charm that seemed to have been made by Natsume appeared in her right hand. The word 'danger' was written on the charm. Her classmates' faces paled upon noticing and they fled the two of them one by one.

However, "......Order." Before Natsume had time to throw out the charm, a charm had already floated to Natsume and the others' heads.

That charm was a wood-element charm of the five elements, and there were three charms in total. The charms turned into vines in midair, tying up Natsume, Harutora, and Kon. They all tumbled to the classroom floor in an instant.

The students in the class were all taken aback, turning to the podium. "......Ahem." The lecturer, who had thrown the charms, coughed lightly, looking at the students present with a measuring expression.

"Uh..... Ato-kun."

"Yes?"

"Pardon me, could you help bring the Tsuchimikado-kuns to the infirmary..... Right now."

"Okay."

"...Cleanse evil... Purify disaster..."

The girl waved a gohei, completely absorbed and with a serious expression. The boy lay on the bead, looking with wide eyes at the gohei moving to and fro above his head.

The prayer had already continued for more than thirty minutes, and the girl had forbidden the boy from moving around recklessly during the prayer. At first she had even asked him to sit properly, but in the end she only ordered him to focus his mind. But the girl didn't specifically instruct him how to focus, just saying "anyway, you have to focus your mind", proving that the girl didn't actually understand what she had to do next.

"...We venerate thee... and offer our respects..."

The gohei swooped over his head and his childhood friend, the girl, continuously chanted an incantation.

The girl ignited the incense she had brought and an unfamiliar aroma pervaded the guestroom. The boy coughed repeatedly, but the girl who was completely focused on the prayer almost didn't notice the abnormality at all.

"Ha--!" Not long after, she called out shrilly, furrowing her brows and swinging the gohei over his head with a large movement. He shrank into his sheets, his body going stiff out of fright.

Then, the girl went motionless. The silence stung his eardrums - but stung his tortured heart even more.

The subtle electronic tone of beeping suddenly sounded from within the sheets. The sound came from the thermometer under the boy's armpit. Upon hearing that, the

girl hastily flung down the gohei in her hands, pulled back the covers, and took the thermometer from the inside of the limp, weak boy's sleeping clothes.

She stared unblinkingly at the numbers on the thermometer..... then showed a dejected expression.

"......No use, the temperature didn't fall..... It rose instead....."

As I thought, the boy replied in his heart. He was very happy the girl felt this way, but he really didn't believe that kind of prayer could treat a cold.

"......Hey, you don't need to help. I'll be good and sleep, so Natsume, you....." The boy coughed while reassuring the girl.

"No!" But, the girl stubbornly shook her head with a serious expression. "I can't just sit back and watch when it's so painful for you. It's alright, don't worry, I still can do something else!"

The girl deftly chose the next magical tool to use, completely disregarding the worry and fear in the boy's heart. The boy could only slowly pull the sheets back and cover himself.

Then, the girl started a prayer again.

"...A vi ra hum kham... Namu Myouhou Ren... Namu Amitabha..... Sowaka!"

"....."

"...Form is the void, and the void is form... naumaku samanda... Sowaka!"

"....."

"...Gyatei Gyatei... Ah, oh no, I forgot to set up the 'protective altar'."

What was a protective altar? The boy thought blankly. Whatever it was, he had a bad premonition in his heart.

★

"......Harutora ran away?"

"Right! When I went to the infirmary, he wasn't there anymore..... He didn't come to you?"

"......I haven't seen him....."

Touji ate the daily special of mackerel miso stew in the academy cafeteria during lunchtime. He picked up the phone call from Natsume, looking around while holding his phone.

After the commotion in the morning, although Natsume had been forcefully brought to the infirmary with Harutora, Natsume had immediately returned to the classroom for the next class, just leaving Harutora and Kon in the infirmary. Once the morning classes ended, Natsume had immediately headed to check on Harutora's condition, but she noticed that Harutora who should have been lying on the bed and quietly recuperating had snuck out of the infirmary at some time.

"Maybe he returned to the dorm to rest after waking up? Anyway, he has a cold, so it's fine if he left early."

"I thought so too, but I went to check with Alpha and Omega. He hasn't left the academy building!"

"Then he might have gone to the bathroom or..... Right, doesn't the infirmary have a nurse? What did the nurse say?"

"It seems like she didn't notice him sneaking out. But, his bed was still very warm, so it seems like he snuck out not long ago!"

"......Uh, then what should we do....."

Natsume seemed to be running around looking for Harutora's whereabouts while speaking to the phone. Natsume's anxious voice came through the phone, and he could also hear her panicked breathing and footsteps.

"......Let me ask, do you have a reason for being so panicked? It's no big deal if Harutora sneaks out of the infirmary, right?"

"This is a big problem! It would be good if he properly went back to his room and slept, but what should we do if he gets into trouble more like the morning!" Natsume shouted on the other end of the phone, seeming to view the situation quite gravely. "Judging from how he was in the morning, he might have lost control right now because of his cold! We have to find him as soon as possible!"

"......Judging from his condition in the morning, it'll be counter-productive if you go to find him....." Touji urged her to calm down, but unfortunately just as he expected, Natsume didn't listen at all.

"Anyway, hurry up and help me find Harutora! Contact me immediately when you notice any sign of him! Understood? Bye." Natsume insisted, hanging up the phone right after she finished speaking. Touji stared at his phone with a frown, worry showing on his face.

He looked around inside the cafeteria again, confirming that Harutora wasn't nearby, and continued silently eating his lunch.

The students in Harutora's class mostly ate lunch in the cafeteria. Very few people brought bentoes, but Momoe Tenma was one of those few people.

He would occasionally eat lunch with Harutora and the others, but it was packed in the cafeteria, and he preferred not to take someone else's spot, so he mostly ate in the classroom since he brought a bento. Today was the usual. He opened his bento in the empty classroom and ate alone.

But, just as he was eating the rice inside, the door of the classroom opened, which was very rare.

Who could it be? Tenma looked towards the classroom door.

"Ah, Harutora-kun."

"......Tenma..... Only you're in the classroom..... Th, That's good....."

Harutora, who had been brought to the infirmary during the morning classes, had returned to the classroom with Kon, who had also been taken away with him, on his back. The shikigami seemed to be sleeping, her face resting on Harutora's shoulder. She seemed quite comfortable.

"Is your cold a bit better?"

"......Cold? Hey hey, Tenma, I don't have - cough - a cold."

"Don't force yourself."

"......Haha, I'm not - achoo - forcing myself....."

Tenma was concerned, but Harutora didn't appreciate it at all, just staggering towards Tenma and sitting weakly in the seat next to him.

He sat Kon in the neighboring seat, sighing deeply and slumping onto the table. Just that small movement already made him short of breath.

"......Hey, Harutora-kun. Your cold is actually very severe. You've been forcing yourself this whole time, right?'

"....." Harutora murmured quietly, as if he didn't even have the energy to respond.

"Have you eaten?"

"......I don't have appetite."

"Please go back to the infirmary and rest..... Right, have you run into Natsume-kun? He ran to the infirmary right after class ended."

"......So my bad premonition came true..... Fortunately I -cough - quickly escaped before class ended."

"Escaped?"

"......But I can't drop my guard, he should still be looking for me everywhere..... That's why I chose to take shelter in the classroom."

"Drop your guard? Shelter?" Tenma asked strangely, but Harutora still had no energy and didn't answer his question.

"Harutora-kun, you should take care of yourself properly and stop forcing yourself. Natsume-kun was worried about you for the entire morning." Tenma wasn't clear on the details but he still worried for Harutora, speaking up to persuade him.

"......Tch..... A, As expected..... Ugh....." But, Harutora's expression was troubled for some reason.

"Huh, what? What's wrong, Harutora-kun?"

"......Natsume really is 'worried' about me....."

"Didn't I say? Also, anyone would be worried about you seeing you like this."

"......Sorry for making everybody worry. I'm really thankful for everyone's concern, but....." Harutora held his head after saying this.

Looking carefully, he was shaking slightly. Did he feel cold? His cold really was very severe - Tenma thought.

Just then, the classroom door opened again. "Gyah!" Harutora let out a pathetic cry, turning towards the entrance.

Once he saw the person who walked in the classroom, he relaxed his breath.

"Wh, What..... It's Kyouko -cough- D, Don't scare me....."

"What, Harutora, why are you here?"

His classmate Kurahashi Kyouko walked into the classroom. Kyouko was from the famous Kurahashi family, the granddaughter of the Onmyou Academy principal Kurahashi Miyo. She always ate lunch in the principal's office with her grandmother.

She walked up to Harutora and Tenma.

"Your cold looks like..... it's not better yet. What are you doing running around outside without properly sleeping?"

"......Huh..... I can't do that -sniff- it's a long story....."

"......Oh, okay....."

Kyouko cast a cold gaze at the stubbornly tight-lipped Harutora.

"Anyway, what happened today morning? Natsume-kun was so worried about you but you ran away from him. Isn't that a bit rude?"

"Now that you say that, why are you avoiding Natsume-kun?"

Kyouko spoke irritatedly, and Tenma also asked a similar question out of worry.

"......I said before, it's a long story..... Cough." Harutora spoke impatiently.

"We're asking you for it!"

"......It has -cough- nothing to do with you....."

"You already interrupted class, so what do you mean it has nothing to do with us."

"Yeah, and I'm really curious what happened. Could it be that your fever is so bad that you're delirious?"

"......You guys don't know a thing, it was from before..... something -cough- from when I was small....." Harutora spoke irritatedly.

It was hard for Kyouko and Tenma to accept that kind of explanation, but the other part was a sick person after all, and it wouldn't be good to stubbornly force the question.

"Whatever, strange things happen to you every couple days anyway." Kyouko shrugged her shoulders, speaking dissatisfiedly. "Also, you helped me out."

"......What did I help with? What does that mean?" Harutora asked but Kyouko didn't reply, slowly drawing out a charm instead for some reason.

"Well - Order."

A wood-element charm.

The charm shot from her fingers, becoming vines in midair and instantly binding Harutora's movements. Tenma cried out in fright and Harutora tumbled from the seat. Kyouko herself looked pleased.

She leisurely pulled out her phone.

"......Hey, Natsume-kun? Yeah, yes, I caught that idiot Harutora..... Hey, don't be that polite..... Ah, I'm in the classroom, yeah..... Okay, see you later."

She cheerfully finished the phone call. Harutora's originally miserable face became even paler.

"N, Natsume? Did you just call Natsume - cough cough!"

"Natsume-kun asked me to help find you."

"You shouldn't be laughing so bashfully, you should be apologizing to me for doing that!"

"You're so stupid, Harutora. I did that for you. You have to properly take care of your cold."

"Was there a reason to suddenly throw out a charm when my guard was down? Damn, T-Tenma! Help me....."

"Sorry."

"You didn't even hesitate!?"

"Yeah, regardless of the method, I also think that Harutora-kun needs to rest quietly. Also, I can't undo that magic."

"You're so cold! Damn! In that case, Kon! Hurry up and cut apart these vines with your wakizashi--"

"......Zzzz....."

"That stupid shikigami!"

Harutora wailed. Tenma felt a bit sorry, but Kyouko didn't even look at him. Kon slept soundly. It was hard to blame him for wanting to cry in this kind of situation.

"Damn - Hmph! In that case, I'll crawl--"

"Harutora! So this is where you were!"

"Too fast! Where were you just now?"

Just as Harutora planned escaping for his life, the door to the classroom suddenly opened and Natsume walked in. She noticed Harutora - a relieved expression flashed across her face - and immediately raised her eyebrows high.

"I can't believe you. What are you doing, Harutora! Stop messing around!"

"Uh, I, I'm not..... I'm fine..... I'm - Cough! Cough cough."

Harutora completely refused to relax, his face clearly poorly-colored because of the cold. It was even inexplicably filled with fear.

Natsume looked up and down at Harutora without blinking. Not long afterwards, she sighed heavily, moving towards Harutora and the others.

"Since this morning, I haven't understood what exactly you've been thinking..... Anyway, right now the most important thing is curing your cold. Please go back to the infirmary and properly rest, or I'll just send you back to the dorm altogether..... Let me make it clear, that's the order of your 'master'." She spoke helplessly.

"......N, Natsume....."

"What's wrong? What do you mean? You're a bit strange today, even for having a cold." Natsume spoke with a slight smile, her expression revealing a tenderness.

Harutora's vine-bound body momentarily relaxed. Kyouko looked at Harutora, her expression as if saying 'Didn't I tell you'. Tenma also nodded affirmatively. Kon still slept soundly.

Natsume gently said: "Don't worry, the teacher in the infirmary said it was just a normal cold..... I might as well help you cure it with magic tomorrow morning - Hey, Harutora!"

Natsume hastily tried to stop him. Harutora scrambled past her, fleeing for dear life while still being tied up. He rolled around, his head and limbs constantly knocking into tables, rolling down the tiered steps of the classroom with a dead-set

determination. Kyouko and Tenma were completely dumbfounded, but Kon never woke up from her sleep.

"H-Harutora! Are you crazy?"

Natsume hastily chased, but - surprisingly - Harutora's speed won out as if he were escaping for his life.

"Cough! Ugh!"

He coughed on the way, crawling on the floor like a bug to the classroom door. "......You should just give up....." Unfortunately, Touji just happened to walk into the classroom, mercilessly stepping on Harutora's back. Harutora collapsed onto the floor as if all of his energy had disappeared.

"...Eloim, Essaim Elo'tm, Essaim... Eko, eko, Azarak, Eko, eko, Azarak..."

The girl constantly prayed, but it was more like black magic than a prayer.

The guest room radiated a strange-colored mist, creating an unusual scene. The weak light source cast ominous shadows everywhere in the room, and various aromas such as the candles and the incense burning on the altar overflowed. Often, a strange pungent odor could be smelled.

The boy was still lying on the sheets. The sleeping clothes he wore had been pushed up and a strange pattern drawn on his body. He could only breathe in gasps with a "Hah, hah....." as if he wanted to cough but couldn't.

"...Ph'nglui mglw'nafh... Cthulhu R'lyeh... Iyah! Iyah! Nyarlathotep, th'ga!"

The girl had a towel wrapped around her head, and she held a staff in her hands that seemed to be an animal bone. She jumped a strange barbarian-like dance, making strange sounds that didn't sound like human speech at all.

The boy lay on the bed, his expression like that of a sacrificial lamb waiting for its slaughter and the bitter taste of its cruel fate.

Of course, this was just a child playing around, but the problem was that she was a child with extraordinary abilities. Color, smell, and sound encircled the guest room, and there were also other things in the room. The boy didn't have the ability to clearly recognize what those things were, but although he didn't have the ability..... What exactly was that strange 'presence' next to his pillow, behind the girl's back? The door that couldn't possibly be opened..... creaked open. What was this 'chill' that came immediately after.....

The girl continued chanting magic.

Hah, hah, the speed of the boy's gasps became more and more rapid.

He would still have to wait several hours before the sky brightened. This night had already been enough to leave a good deal of trauma in the boy's heart.

But.....

★

".....No.....No.....Please.....N-Natsume..... Hachoo!" Harutora sneezed, waking up.

For a time he had no clue what was going on and just breathed chaotically. He gasped, slowly calming down.

He was in his dorm room. The room was dark, and it seemed like night had already fallen. Silence reigned around him. Maybe it was the dead of night.

He relaxed his breath, feeling like his heavy body didn't want to move as if a big rock were pressing down on him..... Right as he thought that, something brushed across his nose and startled him.

"Kon?"

The thing that brushed across his nose was Kon's tail. "......Ugh." He raised his head, looking at his own body and noticed that Kon wasn't dematerialized and was lying inside the sheets covering him - her tail pointing towards his face. Her sleeping face looked quite happy.

"......Wh, What's going on..... Whatever, it doesn't matter....." He laboriously spoke those few words and then laid his head back on the pillow.

He still remembered the lunchtime. Natsume had caught him in the classroom, and his memories were fuzzy after that, but from the fact that he was sleeping in the dorm room, he had probably been carried back to the dorm by someone. His body still didn't feel too well, but for now he was safe.

But.....

"......I had that dream again....."

He didn't remember the contents of the dream just now very clearly, but it seemed to be a continuation of the cream from this morning.

A dream from his childhood. On the night he went to Natsume's house to play, Harutora had caught a cold and Natsume had worked hard to cure his illness, but..... He was unwilling to continue recalling what happened next. He didn't even need to

recall it deliberately, the terror from that night had already been carved deep into his heart.

At the time, the 'thing' he saw had definitely been a 'hallucination' induced by a high fever, a 'mistake', an 'illusion' caused by his own childishness. He was very sure of that, but it didn't help his trauma very much.

"......Really, I can't randomly catch colds like this....." Harutora murmured listlessly.

Just then--

"......Nn....."

A weak voice and a light motion came from next to his pillow, and Harutora hastily looked up.

It was Natsume.

She sat dozing on the tatami, a small washbasin by her hands. Harutora was taken aback, looking to the side and noticing that there was a wet towel on his sheets, fallen by the side of the pillow.

"......N, Natsume.....?" Harutora called out quietly, but Natsume showed no sign at all of waking up, mumbling sleeptalk instead. "......Harutora..... Hurry up..... and get better....."

He quietly gazed at Natsume, then took the wet towel and put it on his forehead. The coldness of the wet towel felt very good.

"......I can't believe you."

He closed his eyes, a wry smile emerging on his lips.

He still remembered that it had been like this back then too. When he was a child, after he had once gotten a cold at Natsume's house, Harutora had also suddenly

woken up in the middle of the night and noticed Natsume sitting and sleeping by his pillow side - just like now.

She looked tired and fatigued, but she still firmly stayed with Harutora.

"I'm sorry, I hope you get well quickly....."She murmured sleeptalk as if she felt a deep guilt.

He made up his mind to recover as soon as possible upon hearing Natsume's words. He had to hurry up and recover his health, This wasn't just for himself, it was also for Natsume.

"I can't just catch a cold whenever....."

Harutora spoke derisively to himself, emptying his mind and preparing to fall back into his dreams. He had to sleep well to let his cold be cured and let his body rest appropriately.

Recover as early as possible and let Natsume relax. That was his responsibility, both as a shikigami and as a friend.

However.....

".....That's weird?"

A warm, unusual smell entered his nose, and Harutora opened his shut eyes.

He opened his eyes, but he couldn't move his body. This wasn't caused by the fever, but was sleep paralysis instead. His eyes anxiously darted around.

Because he was lying on the bed facing the ceiling, he almost couldn't see anything around him, but if he glanced towards the room - it seemed that he could vaguely see strange objects continuously appearing in the corner of his vision.

Perhaps those suspicious objects were magical objects. Harutora momentarily felt the blood draining out of his whole body.

".....N.....N.....N.....Natsume.....?"

His call didn't receive a reply.

The 'presence' from that time was coming again.....

Ah, right, this is a dream, I'm still dreaming. Harutora desperately convinced himself. Right afterwards arose the sound of a thump..... The door.....

Hah, hah. Harutora's breathing became faster and faster.

★

"Hi, you're early today, Harutora..... Hey, are you alright?"

The dorm students all wolfed down their breakfast in the first-floor cafeteria of the Onmyou Academy male dorm.

Ato Touji walked into the dorm cafeteria, suppressing a yawn. He noticed that Tsuchimikado Harutora had somehow started breakfast before him twice in a row.

Harutora desperately ate his breakfast as if he would lose his life if he didn't eat quickly.

"......It seems like your cold's better."

"Nonsense! I couldn't catch a cold!" Harutora stuffed his mouth with food while declaring solemnly. "What cold..... I definitely won't catch a cold again! I'll get enough nutrition! I'll..... I'll be healthy forever!"

He spoke resolutely, but tension and fear showed from his eyes. Touji furrowed his brows, staring at his good friend.

Just then, another student of the dorm walked into the cafeteria.

The student who walked into the cafeteria was Natsume. Touji raised his hand slightly, calling out: "Natsume."

Natsume noticed Touji and Harutora, then noticed that Harutora was eating and beamed happily.

But, once Harutora saw her walk into the cafeteria, he immediately pushed back his chair, making a loud sound, and stood up, uttering with a pale face: "T-Touji, I'm going.....!"

"You're leaving?"

"Bye!"

After saying that, Harutora fled the cafeteria without looking back. Natsume, who was watching from a distance, stood still, dumbfounded. Touji, who was nearby, was also stunned as he watched Harutora leave.

Touji turned to look at Natsume. The two of them glanced at each other, simultaneously putting on a worried and incomprehensive expressions.

".....What is that guy doing?"

The morning cafeteria seemed quite refreshing, the smell of miso soup floating through the air. It was filled with a calm, peaceful presence, a completely different world from that of yesterday night.

Chapter 2 - Practical Skills Training Camp

Part 1

Harutora joyfully sat in his tour bus seat.

It had already been a long time since he had last experienced such calm freedom. In particular, this was his first time since advancing to the second year. Harutora seemed to have finally reclaimed the good mood from when he had watched the blooming cherry blossoms while walking to the academy on the first day of the new term.

Peaceful days were so nice. Harutora carefully mused over that natural sentence, swaying along with the bus.

Harutora sat in an aisle seat, and Natsume sat in the window seat next to him. She was the same as Harutora, seeming to be enjoying the rare peace.

Her expression wasn't bad and her eyes were energetic and crystal clear. Her hair, tied up by a pink ribbon, had also regained its former color, and her cherry-colored lips carried a happy smile.

The two of them both wore a uniform that looked like imperial clothing - the school uniform of the Onmyou Academy. The classmates wearing the uniform in the other seats of the bus chatted noisily. This tour bus that the Onmyou Academy had rented was carrying the entire class.

As an Onmyouji cultivation institute, the Onmyou Academy didn't have activities like school trips. Harutora and the others' current destination was a joint practical skills training camp held with the second and third years.

"I didn't think the Onmyou Academy would also have camps."

"I completely forgot before. There weren't any in the first year."

"That's the best part! The 'first years' 'don't have any'!"

"Yeah. This is coursework 'unrelated to the first-years'!"

Harutora and Natsume looked at each other and smiled with pleasant moods.

In the Onmyou Academy, the first year focused on the classroom, and only the basics of practical skills would be explained. But it was the opposite from the second year onwards, as magical training became the focal point. This practical skills training camp was a common curriculum between the second and third years. It was held on the weekends with no regular schedule, and this time it was the turn of Harutora's class.

All of the students in the Onmyou Academy knew very well that the practical skills training beginning in the second year was quite demanding. Actually, the practical skills curriculum from April onwards would increase in difficulty as well as frequency. Of course, this was also quite a difficult training camp.

Even so, this still couldn't weaken Harutora and Natsume's excited moods.

"Wow, I'm looking forward to this camp."

"I'm really looking forward to this camp."

"Come to think of it, don't you feel very happy already?'

"Yeah. How should I describe it - a feeling of breaking away from normal life?"

"Right, that's it! Escaping 'bother'!"

"Should I call it excitement, or joy--?"

"It's great!"

"It really is."

They were completely like elementary schoolers on an excursion. They didn't feel any tension at all about the tough training camp that was coming.

It was actually quite shameful for second-year students to feel extremely happy at the fact that the first-year students weren't here, but of course Harutora and Natsume didn't notice this point. No, even if they noticed, they didn't care. After all, they had frequently been 'called out' recently, even on Saturdays and Sundays, with no free time at all to be at ease. This training camp could be called the golden 'free' time. Harutora and Natsume showed naive, brilliant smiles in unprecedented harmony.

In the seat on the other side of the aisle, a girl with chestnut hair halfway tied up and a feisty personality happened to be looking at the two of them. She was the Onmyou Academy Principal's granddaughter, Kurahashi Kyouko. Kyouko tilted her knee sock-wearing legs, secretly peeking in the direction of Harutora and Natsume. In the end, she seemed to finally lose her patience.

She spoke to Momoe Tenma, who was sitting next to her:

".....What are those two doing?'

".....Who knows?"

It seemed like Tenma had the same questions. A perplexed expression emerged on the face of this good-natured boy, and the eyes beneath his glasses constantly blinked.

"It's hard to understand. Maybe if it were only that idiot Harutora, but even Natsume's....."

"Yeah. The two of them haven't been in high spirits for a long time."

"Something good probably happened."

"Yeah....."

Kyouko and Tenma spoke in a voice that no one around them could hear, exchanging their doubts in a quiet whisper.

This was indeed the first time they were having class in a place outside the academy building, so naturally there was a new feeling. It was inevitable that they would look forward to a long road trip with their classmates and then living together for a night. Though Kyouko had originally only wanted to travel together with Natsume, she also believed that the training camp this time would be an extremely fun activity.

Even so, this training camp was a form of coursework, and since they wouldn't have time to relax, there wouldn't be any recreational activities. They would start the tough practical skills training as soon as they arrived, and they would return straight to Tokyo once it ended, that was it. Also, the weekend, which should have been time to relax anyway, had been forcefully occupied. In addition to Kyouko, most of the students in the class probably felt apathetic about this training camp.

But they were in far higher spirits than expected, and even making a clamor. It was very reasonable for Kyouko and Tenma to wonder.

"......It's very possible that when they were in the Tsuchimikado family, their regulations forbade travel or vacations."

"And so they're jumping for joy all of a sudden? No matter what, that kind of situation....."

"Maybe the two of them weren't able to participate in any excursions or trips before because they were sick or injured--"

"Even so, it's....."

Kyouko and Tenma brainstormed together.

They thought long and hard, but looked at Harutora and Natsume without coming up with anything:

"Ah, right. Harutora. Have some snacks."

"Hey, not bad. It's good."

They had even started eating snacks. How leisurely and comfortable.

"I have senbei, karinto, and ningyouyaki"

"Ahaha. Natsume, you prepared too much."

"Harutora, you even brought playing cards."

"Hey, you have to bring playing cards to a camp."

"Then we can play old maid or sevens at night. I'm really looking forward to it!"

"Playing with small bets isn't bad either, the atmosphere gets intense!"

Unfortunately, only Harutora and Natsume were enthusiastic. Kyouko and Tenma awkwardly watched the two Tsuchimikados.

Just then, Harutora finally noticed the gazes of Kyouko and the others.

"Huh? What's up, Kyouko. Do you want some?"

"I didn't say that at all!"

".....Could it be that you don't like traditional snacks?"

"Ah, n-no, Natsume-kun! That's not it.....!"

Kyouko didn't know how to respond to the master and servant pair who seemed to not understand the atmosphere. Tenma, who couldn't keep on watching, helped out.

"Well, Harutora-kun, Natsume-kun. This training camp is coursework for the moment. I don't think it's too good to play around and be noisy with that kind of attitude."

Though he was trying to kill their mood, Tenma spoke somewhat apologetically.

Even so, Harutora didn't seem to be affected.

He munched on a senbei while beaming. "Don't be that serious, Tenma. According to your words, aren't field trips and excursions part of school too?"

"B, But..... Isn't this sort of practical skills training camp very difficult? You might not be able to keep up with the curriculum if you take it too lightly....."

"You don't get it, Tenma. Isn't it useless to notice that kind of thing now? Also, it's better to enjoy it or be relaxed than it is to be nervous."

"That's reasonable....."

Harutora's words were probably correct, but it didn't seem very convincing when he munched loudly on a senbei while saying it - it might even make others reject that reasoning.

"Natsume-kun is a different matter, but you shouldn't be this easygoing."

Kyouko glared angrily at Harutora.

"Also, why are you like this? Why are you smiling so happily? Isn't it weird?"

"Huh? N, No..... We aren't smiling that much. It's very normal. Right, Natsume?"

"Yeah, there's nothing in particular..... Think about it, I always liked Onmyoudou, so I'm thinking about what kind of things we'll do during the training camp."

"Also, isn't travelling with only your own class something that makes you extremely happy? It's 'only' the students from your class!"

"Right! It's much easier to deepen feelings with each other than it usually is. 'With everyone from the class'!"

".....Though I would really welcome deepening our feelings for each other with Natsume-kun....."

He might be wrong, but it seemed that Kyouko showed a complex expression as she watched the jubilant Harutora and Natsume, and her words were also quiet and unclear. The face of Tenma next to her seemed like he also wanted to express something but didn't know how to say it.

Then,

"Ah, right. Hey, Harutora-kun. Speaking of classmates, where's Touji-kun? He's the only one who's going to meet up with us later, did something happen?"

Tenma seemed to have thought of this question.

Actually, Ato Touji wasn't on this bus. The homeroom teacher Ohtomo had explained beforehand that he was going to 'come a bit later', but hadn't specifically explained the situation.

Harutora laughed quietly.

"Actually, my dad's coming to Tokyo this weekend."

"Harutora-kun's dad?'

"Yes. My dad - he's Touji's primary physician..... The person responsible for the 'seal' on him. After the Nue incident, Touji went back to the country to receive my dad's treatment. Since Touji hadn't gotten checked up since then, and my dad happened to be in Tokyo, he's first going to receive treatment and then participate in the training camp."

".....I see."

After hearing Harutora's explanation, Tenma as well as Kyouko nodded with an appearance of comprehension.

Touji had been involved in a Tokyo spiritual disaster about two years ago. The phase three mobile 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster had left behind residue in his body. In General Onmyoudou, people who had become spiritual cores but who held on to their own consciousness were named 'living spirits'. Touji was one of these.

The 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster in Touji's body had been sealed by an Onmyou doctor, who also happened to be Harutora's father. The most important reason he had chosen to transfer into the Onmyou Academy to study with the goal of becoming an Onmyouji was because he hoped that he could seal and purify the demon hiding in his body by himself.

However, this March, he had changed his methods of dealing with the demon and had succeeded in purifying a Nue together with Harutora and Natsume. He hadn't sealed the demon. Rather, he had even used the demon's strength.

"After the Nue incident ended, Touji received training while watching his condition. The treatment this time will depend on the results of the special training. The most effective method for Touji right now is to get it sealed."

"Th, Though I don't really understand, the seal's just being upgraded, right?"

"Actually, I'm not very sure either, but that's probably it, right? That guy's getting more and more reliable."

Harutora spoke casually and Kyouko replied without a care.

"I get what you mean..... But, is it alright? Isn't it a bit dangerous for him to be participating in the practical skills training camp right after large-scale adjustments?"

"He thinks that this is a 'godsend', to be able to test out his own skills earlier."

"......T, Touji-kun is really incredible."

"......He really has self-confidence, that's definitely something he would say."

Tenma was convinced, but Kyouko felt greatly astonished.

Kyouko was the eldest daughter of the famous Kurahashi family, and Tenma had also been born in one of the traditional families rife with Onmyouji, so they could understand the danger of 'living spirits' better than a normal academy student. In particular, Touji had once been consumed by the demon to a degree and had almost transformed into a demon.

Even so, Touji didn't flee, but still had the courage to actively face the demon. Kyouko and Tenma both secretly gave him the highest evaluation for that point.

But at the same time, they really couldn't suppress their 'anxiety'.

Dealing with a 'demon' - even if it was just residue, not the original - was usually the domain of professional Onmyouji. To try to control a demon - that sort of action wasn't only dangerous, it was also foolhardy. It was natural for an academy student to have such a reaction.

But, Kyouko and Tenma were currently already Onmyou Academy second-year students, and in the near future they would step into the world of professional Onmyouji. They were also improving themselves every day in order to step into the professional world. The difficulty Touji was trying to overcome might be an extremely special case, but Kyouko and Tenma couldn't take things lightly.

"......We can't keep messing around."

"......Th, That's right....."

They couldn't lose to their classmates. Kyouko murmured quietly, and Tenma also lightly nodded his head in unison to express his agreement.

On the other hand, Harutora didn't notice the psychological change in the two at all, leisurely handing out senbei.

"Anyway, that's what's going on. Since it's rare for us to come out like this, you all might as well eat Touji's share too."

"......Didn't I say I wouldn't eat them?"

"I heard that senbei are good for your aura."

"Don't make up whatever you want!"

"Sorry, Kurahashi-san, if I knew earlier I would have brought some snacks other than Japanese snacks....."

"That's not it! That's not what I meant, Natsume-kun, don't misunderstand.....!"

"Tenma, do you want some? Here."

"H, Harutora-kun, I'm grateful, but no thanks....."

Harutora, Kyouko, and the others bickered back and forth. Because Touji, who was responsible for stopping them, wasn't here, it was noisier than usual.

"Quiet down." Just then, a lazy voice sounded. A man walked over from the front seats.

He wore a pair of aged glasses on his face and wore a rumpled suit. His right foot was a wooden fake leg like a medieval pirate's. He was Harutora and the others' homeroom teacher, Ohtomo Jin.

"You're too loud, don't forget that this camp is also class."

"Sorry."

Kyouko's face reddened, and Harutora and the others also smiled awkwardly. Ohtomo looked at the students with a helpless face.

"You guys are really relaxed. I don't mean to frighten you, but you should know that the camp will be very tiring. It's good to be full of vigor, but I'm scared that your energy will start to deplete and you'll end up not being able to make it."

"Sensei, we're not relaxed, we're recuperating!"

"Whatever, being eloquent isn't a bad thing for a practitioner....."

Harutora acted dumb, eliciting a wry smile from Ohtomo. But Natsume regained her calmness, bowing to apologize out of trepidation. "We're very sorry. We were too loud. We'll eat a bit more quietly."

"......In the end you're still going to eat....."

"Huh? We can't eat snacks?"

"Uh, you don't need to be that surprised."

Natsume, who held a bag of senbei, was greatly shocked. Upon seeing her like that, the wry smile on his face deepened.

He reached his hand into the bag of senbei, taking a piece of senbei out of the speechless Natsume's hands.

"Anyway, it's no use to be anxious, it's better to relax when you can..... You should take advantage of the present to properly relax." Ohtomo glanced at Harutora and Natsume as he said this, walking back to his own seat while munching the senbei. Harutora, Natsume and others were confused and perplexed. For some reason, they even felt a trace of sympathy from Ohtomo's look.

"......What does that mean?"

"I don't understand either....."

Harutora and Natsume were a bit worried, taking another senbei each.

After the senbei, the bag of karinto had also been emptied when the tour bus reached its destination.

The bus had driven for two hours from inside Tokyo, carrying Harutora's class to a camp near Lake Yamanaka, one of the Fuji Five Lakes of the Yamanashi Prefecture.

The Lake Yamanaka area was a scenic summer resort as well as a famed attraction. At the same time, due to the penetration of aura flow from Mount Fuji, the area was also known for its special aura. Because of these relationships, this area had many magic-related facilities and was used as a 'training field' for first-class magic.

The area the Onmyou Academy had chosen to be the location of the camp was a shrine among these training fields - Zokusho Shrine.

This shrine was little-known. Guessing from the name, it might be a shrine related to the stars. The shrine was located on a precipitous hill, overlooked by Mount Fuji. Underneath could be seen Lake Yamanaka, and behind it was a vast forest. The shrine had been set in the middle ground in order to keep this natural beauty from being destroyed by humans.

The tour bus drove to the foot of the mountain, then all of the students climbed the long stone steps, carrying their own luggage.

They climbed up, short of breath and covered in sweat, and once they reached the top--

"Senpais, you're so slow~ When are you going to make me wait until?"

A small girl wearing a pure white uniform sat on the top of the stone steps, her back against an ancient stone torii. She jumped up gracefully, the golden-dyed hair tied up into twin tails jumping around on both sides of her small face.

She wore a sweet, blooming smile on her face. Kyouko, Tenma, and other students couldn't help but let out surprised cheers.

Harutora and Natsume's hands loosened, the luggage in their hands dropping heavily onto the ground.

Ohtomo looked at the students who were in a joyful clamor - deliberately ignoring the petrified and dumbfounded two Tsuchimikado - and coughed loudly.

"Ahem..... I 'forgot' to mention something. Dairenji Suzuka-kun will join our class and participate in this training camp. The first-year students basically don't have any practical skills curriculum, but she's a special student after all. Get along well with her, everyone."

Part 2

There was a large auditorium inside Zokusho Shrine with rooms for doubles. The students who had come to the camp lived in this place.

The third-year students who were also participating in the training camp had come several days early. Though they also had a training camp, the third-years had to stay for four days and three nights as compared to the second-years, whose curriculum was two days and one night. The contents of their curriculum were also far more difficult than that of the second-years. The two classes would only have class together on the final day. As Harutora and the others arrived, the third-year students were carrying out 'mountain training', and hence he wasn't able to see them.

Once they reached the shrine, Harutora and the others put their luggage into the auditorium, then went to Ameba Shrine to pay their respects, immediately starting the training camp curriculum.

The first class was in the courtyard of the auditorium. The contents of the curriculum were to prepare lunch - curry.

"The ingredients and tools are all here. Since we've finally come to a place with such refreshing air, let's pretend we've come here to camp out."

Ohtomo announced seriously. Meat, vegetables, and commercially available curry blocks were placed on the tables that had been prepared outdoors beforehand.

Every single student was stunned and speechless, and he grinned again.

"You can't directly touch these ingredients and tools. It's not just the ingredients, you have to use a simple shikigami to do things like turning on the fire and putting things on plates. Understood? Remember, simple shikigami, alright? There's no time limit, but the next class starts in the afternoon, so you won't have much of a lunch break if you're late, you might even have to start class without having eaten lunch~"

Harutora and the others were divided into four or five person groups per table. Each group had a set of ingredients and tools, and each person was given a new charm and immediately started making curry.

Almost all the students were flustered for a while because things were so sudden. Maybe they had imagined the contents of the training camp curriculum beforehand, but for sure no one had expected them to be ordered to prepare lunch themselves.

Harutora was also troubled and didn't act immediately.

"......Make curry with a simple shikigami..... Tenma, have you done this?"

"I don't think there's anyone that's done this. However if it's shikigami that could act independently....."

"I recall that this is a commercially sold charm. Have we used it in practical skills classes?"

"Yeah, it's set with the most basic abilities."

Fortunately, Harutora was in the same group as Tenma. He looked around, seeing that Natsume, Kyouko, and Suzuka had all been separated into different groups. It seemed that Ohtomo had deliberately arranged them so that the groups' strengths weren't too different.

Harutora relaxed his breath for now since he had been put in a different group as Suzuka. Though, it was just a short relaxation.

"Uh, a simple shikigami..... In this instance, it's faster to manipulate it directly rather than ordering it beforehand right?"

"That's true, it's best to have the same sight and even touch when selecting ingredients. Ah, but I haven't tried sharing taste with a shikigami for taste-testing."

"The steps are to first wash the vegetables, cut them, cook them with the meat, then add water and simmer, and then finally put in the curry blocks....."

"Don't forget to cook rice. We have to wash the rice and then steam it with a cooker..... Ah, and we have to make the fire first. No, wait, we have to find firewood before we make the fire....."

It was close to eleven in the morning. There would be ample time if it were just simply cooking curry, but here there wasn't any spare time to dawdle. At the same time as they discussed, there were already many groups that had made simple shikigami and who were preparing to work.

"Okay, let's start moving. The person who's the worst at controlling simple shikigami in this group..... is probably me."

Harutora sized up Tenma and the other members of the group, unable to keep a wry smile from showing on his face. He relied on his own training to practice his charm skills and techniques, but even now he wasn't very practiced with simple shikigami control, especially instructing it with fine movements.

"Sorry, I'll take charge of making the fire. I'll leave the cooking to everyone else."

"Okay, let's split up and get going."

Upon seeing Tenma and the other members nod to express their agreement, Harutora quickly took his own charm.

He refined his aura, turning it into magical energy, then released the magical energy and infused it into the charm. The energy-infused charm gradually swelled according to the previously set magic, changing. The flat paper doll became a shadow puppet with thickness, which was the appearance set to the charm beforehand.

"Hey, Harutora-kun, isn't your shikigami a bit too big?"

"S, Sorry, but this size should be perfect for moving firewood. First is to bring firewood over..... Ah, no, we have to make a stone stove first out of rocks."

The simple shikigami of Tenma and the others organized the ingredients by the table. Harutora's giant shikigami searched for big rocks nearby, making a stone stove. Fortunately, there were cement bricks in the courtyard - maybe objects used in a stone stove during similar training. Harutora set them up, making a stone stove with only one opening. Then, he put the firewood inside it, crumpling the newspaper that had been prepared with the materials into a pile and putting it under the firewood.

Until now, everything had gone unexpectedly smoothly. "Ah! Damn, I crushed the lighter!" But, just as he planned on lighting the newspaper and making the fire, he crushed the lighter because he hadn't properly controlled the shikigami's strength.

"O, Ohtomo-sensei! Could I ask if you have any new lighters--"

"Nope."

"No?!"

"Harutora-kun, you have to rely on your own resources to make up for your own mistake."

"How do I make up for this....."

The possibilities Harutora could think of regarding methods for starting a fire only consisted of using a magnifying glass to focus sunlight, but of course, there couldn't be a magnifying glass here.

He had no options, so he could only take the firewood axe and sharpen the tip of one of the pieces of firewood into something like the point of a pencil.

The simple shikigami held the piece of firewood with both hands, rubbing the other firewood with it like a drill and trying to make a fire with friction by creating sparks.

Of course, succeeding in making a fire wasn't this easy.

"......Tch, no use, I can't make it.....!"

"Harutora-kun, are you alright?"

"I'm not alright at all, do I really have no other ways.....!"

Harutora frowned, continuing to desperately rub the firewood.

Just then, a quiet voice entered his ears.

"H-H-Harutora-sama, allow me to perform this task."

A girl's young voice sounded. The voice came from the defensive shikigami who was dematerialized and always by Harutora's side - Kon.

"Oh, it's Kon. Come to think of it, you can use fire."

"Yes, making fire is an easy task if I use my foxfire.....!"

Though he couldn't see her figure, he could tell from Kon's tone that she was extremely motivated. Kon was a kitsune shikigami, and foxfire was one of her several techniques. Since she could use it without even materializing, no one would be the wiser if he stayed careful.

"But..... After all, this is a practical skills class, and sensei instructed us that we have to use simple shikigami. So I can't ask for your help or I'll be breaking the rules."

"H-H-However, why should this delay Harutora-sama's meal.....!"

"Uh..... Then let's leave it until later. I'm grateful for your offer, though."

Harutora rejected his shikigami's goodwill, but he couldn't help but think that there were still Natsume's ningyouyaki left after all - finding himself a path of retreat.

But, Harutora wasn't actually the only student to encounter setbacks during the process of cooking.

"Hey! Why's this potato still have skin on it, go peel it cleanly!"

"There isn't even half of the potato left after you peeled it! Go tell your shikigami to be a little neater!"

"Hey hey, it's spilling! Don't pour the rice out with the water for washing it!"

"......I, I can't believe it, to think peeling onions could be this hard.....!"

Every group was falling into a bitter struggle. Some people failed to hold things properly, dropping meat and vegetables onto the ground, and some people accidentally cut the shikigami's fingers while cutting vegetables. Some even cut apart the cutting board under the fingers, and other shikigami rushed into the ignited firewood. There were manifold reasons for failure, and simple shikigami turning back into charms could be seen everywhere.

It was a basic expectation for practitioners to be able to directly control simple shikigami and have their shikigami maintain materialization. Hence, if one didn't infuse all one's magical energy from the beginning, one had to continue constantly infusing the shikigami with magical energy instead. The latter required much more caution during fine control than the former. The magical energy couldn't break in the middle, and concentration couldn't waver.

"......Hey, Tenma, don't you think doing this kind of thing is actually pretty difficult?"

"Yeah..... As expected of the practical curriculum."

Tenma's face was ashen as he agreed with the opinion that Harutora casually put out. Thinking carefully, because he normally didn't cook much, this might not even get

done well if he were doing it with his own hands. Now that it was being done by a simple shikigami, it couldn't possibly go smoothly.

"Come to think of it, I've only cooked curry while camping once."

That meant..... Harutora looked at the other groups - the condition of the groups that Natsume, Kyouko, and Suzuka were in. As he expected, all of the groups were flustered, and comparing them to Harutora's group was like the pot calling the kettle black. Every group had a simple shikigami whose movements were particularly nimble, far surpassing the other shikigami of the group - the exterior of Suzuka's shikigami had even been changed to match hers - but these shikigami didn't contribute a great deal.

For example, Natsume's shikigami moved extremely vigorously, as if it had its own vitality, but it was cutting the carrots into centimeter-wide units with the cooking knife in its hands. The shikigami's movements were very precise, but not only would lunchtime be over by the time she finished cutting all of the carrots so slowly, she might not even make dinnertime. On the other hand, Suzuka's shikigami moved so rapidly one might be able to see afterimages, but it wasn't distinguishable whether the things that came out were vegetables that had been cut or food scraps. Kyouko was undoubtedly the most reliable of the three, but she seemed to have burned up all of the kindling newspaper while trying to light the firewood and received a merciless rejection when she asked Ohtomo for more kindling.

".....Huh? Come to think of it, Tenma's actually the most reliable among us, right?"

Though he wasn't too nimble, Tenma's stats were well-rounded and he carried out the preparation work step by step. When the other members of the group slipped up, he would try to help out as much as possible, and he was actually very trustworthy.

But, this was just the preparation phase after all. If Harutora was unable to successfully start the fire, all the members of the group would be reduced to just eating the lettuce in the end.

"Move a little faster, you're pressed for time and the ingredients also have their limits~ If you fail a few more times, the food might all go bad~"

Ohtomo watched the condition of every group, smiling maliciously. At the same time, he didn't forget to tease them with a few words, telling everyone to put in more effort. "Damn." Harutora cursed himself, continued rubbing the firewood to make fire.

"What's wrong, Harutora-kun, that's quite a primitive method."

"Please give me a new lighter if you don't want to see this!"

"Tsk tsk tsk, firemaking was a sacred action in ancient times. It's very suitable as the starting point of this practical skills magic training."

"You definitely don't actually think that way, right? And what's up with the smirk on your face!"

Harutora complained angrily and Ohtomo laughed out loud while listening.

"Don't misunderstand me, Harutora-kun. I'm really very happy to see you continue to grow. At the start, you couldn't even control a vessel, but now you can already control the simple shikigami however you want. I'm really pleased as your homeroom teacher."

Harutora controlled the simple shikigami's movements while glaring resentfully at the homeroom teacher who put his hand on his chest with grand movements.

He got even angrier when he thought of how Ohtomo's lunch would be prepared separately, but he happened to want to talk to Ohtomo.

".....Hey, Ohtomo-sensei." He casually walked up to Ohtomo, speaking quietly with a sharp tone. "It's not convenient to ask this in front of everyone, but why is Suzuka participating in this camp? It couldn't be that she herself wanted to come, right?'

He lowered his voice, speaking quickly like a cannon. Ohtomo reacted by turning his head, looking indifferent.

".....Yeah, she herself wanted--"

"No way! Why would she say she wanted to participate in a camp!?"

"You're wrong there, she answered unexpectedly readily--"

"So sensei really did ask her to come!"

When Ohtomo saw Harutora show a sharp gaze, he called out "Harutora-kun" in a low tone, putting his hand on his shoulder like he wanted to placate his anger. Then, he said with a transparent tone: "Did Suzuka-kun herself tell you the reason she entered the Onmyou Academy?'

"Huh? Uh, yes....." Harutora stammered for a bit when Ohtomo confirmed this.

Suzuka had passed the difficult First-Class Onmyou Exam, becoming one of the National First-Class Onmyouji, known as the 'Twelve Divine Generals'. In terms of power, she was one of the most prominent Onmyouji in the nation. Never mind students, even a normal professional was unqualified to be compared to her.

Though she had the identity of a special student, she had entered the cultivation facility for Onmyouji - the Onmyou Academy - to study, but actually she had other reasons. Since she had led to the incident last year, her punishment was to enter the Onmyou Academy.

"The main reason Suzuka-kun led to that kind of incident was because her personality hasn't matured. Entering the Onmyou Academy to study is to help her

develop as a person and for her to receive so-called moral education. Do you understand?"

"That..... The Onmyou Academy shouldn't have many techniques to teach her....."

"Well, then what's the fastest and most effective form of moral education? Of course, that's establishing good and healthy interpersonal relationships. In other words, I believe the most suitable method is for her to make friends--"

"Uh, hold on, if you want her to make friends, wouldn't it be fine to find students of the same age? That's a true natural, healthy interpersonal relationship, right? Why..... What reason is there to deliberately make her join the second-year camp!"

Harutora brought up a reasonable question. Ohtomo narrowed his eyes upon hearing that, staring at Harutora with a cold gaze, and called out majestically: "......Harutora-kun."

"Wh, What?'

"You..... I heard that you and Suzuka-kun were 'intimate friends', you know."

The simple shikigami that Harutora controlled tumbled violently to the ground.

The firewood fell to the ground and the stone stove he had managed to build was destroyed. Tenma and the others were taken aback, turning to look at him, but unfortunately he didn't have the energy to pay attention right now.

"Th, That's not true, where did you hear that?"

"......You don't need to glare at me, it's already spread that Suzuka-kun calls you 'darling'--"

"That's a huge misunderstanding! That's because..... I was forced."

"Didn't you call her Suzuka directly just now--"

"That was because she would gone off again if I didn't call her that! She's always picking on me, so I have to!"

"Oh my, how intimate--"

"Stop that!"

"Yeah, but, Suzuka-kun needs friends, and I asked you to look after her. Whatever the result, I definitely won't spread any rumors--"

"I said, it's not like that! I have my own difficulties!"

"Oh, difficulties, huh?"

"That's right!"

"......Hey, Harutora-kun, I don't want to act as if I know everything, but a man can't be so timid--"

"What is that supposed to mean!"

Harutora was flustered and his face red. The members of his group as well as other students looked over curiously, wanting to know what had happened. Harutora didn't notice their gazes, as it already took all of his energy to untangle his homeroom teacher's confusion.

To tell the truth, Ohtomo didn't truly suspect the relationship between the two, he just wanted to tease Harutora a bit. "Alright, alright." He laughed and let go of Harutora's shoulder, saying a couple carefree words.

"I won't ask what your difficulties are, but right now, you're undoubtedly the person Suzuka-kun is the closest to - and that group of yours. Thinking carefully, only you know what happened with Suzuka-kun, so it's natural that things developed like this. That's why it was the correct choice to ask her to participate in this camp."

Ohtomo spoke self-confidently, but Harutora pouted angrily upon hearing that.

"Of course, I hope that she can get along better and better with the students in her own class along with you guys, but that kind of thing isn't urgent, and I still have to rely on your help for her interpersonal relationships for now."

Ohtomo whispered into Harutora's ear and finally grinned.

"Here." Then, he passed a magic charm to the displeased Harutora.

"I'll give you a little push so that you guys will be able to eat lunch."

"......A fire charm?"

Ohtomo had passed over a fire-element charm of the five elements. Harutora looked at the magical charm and looked at Ohtomo, not understanding the point of this charm.

"You want me to make fire with this charm? But weren't the rules that we were supposed to use simple shikigami....." Saying this much, Harutora gasped, finally noticing Ohtomo's meaning.

The corners of Ohtomo's mouth curved slightly.

Harutora hastily stacked up the stone stove again, putting the firewood in and then giving the fire-element charm to the shikigami.

He had never tried this before, but he was quite confident in his charm-using ability after his long period of training himself on his own after school.

He focused his mind, strengthening his link with the simple shikigami and providing more magical energy, then let the magical energy flow into the simple shikigami's charm.

"......Burn..... Order!"

He instructed the shikigami to throw the fire charm at the firewood. The charm immediately ignited, swirling with flame. The fire formed by magic complied with the intent of its practitioner, wrapping around the piled-up firewood like a flaming snake. Harutora - and the simple shikigami - couldn't help but clench his fist and cheer.

"Yes! Perfect - Ah, no way - Damn, it seems like the fire's too strong!"

"Yeah, that's just like you, Harutora-kun. The strength of the fire's quite shocking, half of the firewood turned to charcoal in an instant..... Actually it burned to ash....."

"Nooo! I have to disperse the fire quickly - Ouch! The sensory link still hasn't been disrupted?"

Harutora frantically had his shikigami pick up the firewood, then screamed again and hastily let go. Ohtomo couldn't stop laughing as he watched. Kyouko, who was having the same trouble with lighting the fire, seemed to make something out of this, quickly taking similar methods as Harutora - though suitably regulating the fire's strength - and making a fire on the firewood.

On the cooking side, there were groups who had already finished preparing the ingredients and had begun to cook. They put oil into a flat-bottomed pot, then put it on their stone stove, stirring meat and vegetables inside and giving off the sound of cooking food. There were also groups who were using rice cookers to steam rice in addition to those who were preparing the curry.

Tenma confirmed the preparation of their group.

"Harutora-kun! We're almost ready!"

"Okay, I'm also adjusting the strength of the fire in the stone stove. Our group can start cooking!"

The simmering meat and vegetables gave off a delicious smell, stimulating the appetite and motivation of the students.

Not long afterwards, the smell turned into the smell of curry freely floating in the vast courtyard of the auditorium.

★

"......Yeah, it's not so bad that it's impossible to swallow, but you can't call this good....."

"This is already very good. This charred rice is indeed crunchy, but..... It counts as a different style."

Harutora and Tenma exchanged wry smiles as they scooped curry from aluminum dishes with spoons.

Actually, the curry that Harutora's group had made didn't count as a success. Because the fire had been too strong, the curry and rice had gotten a bit burned, though this could be regarded as delicious based on the taste itself. Moreover, when enjoying curry outdoors with friends on a clear day while they could simultaneously gaze at Mount Fuji and the beautiful Lake Yamanaka, they couldn't possibly consider it bad. The other groups' students also criticized the curry they had made while eating with beaming smiles.

"But, I never thought that simple shikigami could be used to make food too."

"That's right. Simple shikigami are usually disposable and they're almost all used for simple actions."

Simple shikigami - more accurately, simple manmade shikigami. They were the basic shikigami used in General Onmyoudou, shikigami whose distinguishing feature was being quickly constructible to fulfill a necessity. Just as Tenma had said, the strongest feature of these shikigami was that they were usable to quickly deal with sudden situations.

On the other hand, since the creation method was simple even for a normal person and they were very easy to make according to one's own demands, the high adaptability aspect of simple shikigami could be considered a big advantage. Though their energy for movement came from and relied upon the practitioner's magical energy and they weren't suitable for moving over long periods of time, this wasn't much of a big problem if preparations were made beforehand. Simple shikigami could have various uses according to the practitioner's ingenuity and strength.

"The steps for 'making curry' like everyone did this time are complicated, which isn't suitable for the use of simple shikigami. But, I noticed after actually controlling them that it's actually not impossible. If you think a little, simple shikigami can do a lot of fine work. It's very profound."

"I see."

Tenma brought up an opinion that was something like a prodigy would say. Harutora ate his curry while nodding to express his agreement.

Harutora had a defensive shikigami, Kon. Kon belonged to the class of shikigami that had their own autonomous personality, and the practitioner Harutora didn't have to control her directly. Of course, he didn't share senses with her either. Though he had practiced techniques for controlling shikigami during practical classes, this was his first time truly 'applying' a simple shikigami.

"Though it was very difficult, Natsume-kun, Kurahashi-san and Dairenji-san really are incredible. Though they're not very good at cooking, their control of shikigami is simply unmatched." Tenma looked at the three, his tone full of admiration. "Especially Natsume-kun. It's like the shikigami is a part of him."

"Yeah, his shikigami burned itself while cooking and started jumping around. Nothing happened to him, but the shikigami caused quite a big disturbance."

"That means that his mind was completely focused on the simple shikigami. It's actually a very amazing thing."

"It's because he had harsh training from his father ever since he was young."

"But normally someone wouldn't get special training like that unless he had talent to begin with."

Tenma seemed to feel deep admiration. Harutora was about to reply carelessly, but.....

...Hold on.

"......Part of him....." Harutora murmured, frowning and straightening himself unconsciously. "Hey, Tenma? Controlling from a long distance - and while transferring the practitioner's personality in the shikigami, is that kind of manipulation very difficult?"

"Huh? O, Of course it's not very easy....." Tenma was taken aback upon hearing Harutora's sudden question. "But..... If the magic was set up beforehand, it would just be up to the practitioner's own magical energy afterwards. The degree of 'transferring personality' also affects the difficulty level."

"You can't feel anything strange with ordinary touch, and after materializing, you can't even see any flaw in its external appearance. It was created with extreme detail

so that never mind a normal person, even professional Onmyouji couldn't easily see through it."

"You mean that that shikigami could even fool the eyes of professional Onmyouji? That's really incredible. It means that the practitioner controlling the shikigami was probably at a professional level - and his power was extremely strong, or else he wouldn't be able to do that. Also, 'making a shikigami similar to a human that no one can see through' is naturally harder than 'making a shikigami visibly similar to a human'. Also, like I just said, normally no one would put in the effort to hone that sort of technique."

"I, I see....." Harutora chimed in solemnly upon hearing Tenma's explanation, but he immediately showed his incomprehension. "......A professional with extraordinary techniques? That person should be even more stupid than me in some sense..... How could she have some incredible role?" He murmured in wonder with a serious expression. Tenma was taken aback as he listened to Harutora sink into worry alone.

"What's wrong? Harutora-kun, could it be that you saw such an incredible shikigami?"

"Huh? Yeah, I guess....."

Harutora suddenly felt a bit awkward upon being asked that and glossed over it briefly. He didn't have any meaning to hide it - though he thought that it was very difficult to talk clearly about this matter and that it would take a lot of work to explain. Most importantly, he didn't know why he felt that he couldn't talk about it.

Just then--

"Harutora-senpai, what are you talking about~"

A hateful, sweet voice rang out and Harutora's body inadvertently stiffened.

He turned to look at the source of the voice, noticing that Suzuka was holding the curry her group had made and smiling sweetly.

"Dairen....."

"Hmm?"

".....S, Suzuka..... What do you want?"

"Do you even need to ask? Of course I came to let Darling taste the curry I made."

Suzuka deliberately pretended to be cute when she talked, keeping a fake smile on her face. Harutora's face sank, muttering: "What?", but when he looked at Suzuka's sharp gaze, he hastily changed his attitude.

"...Uh, I see, then since it's a rare opportunity..... T, Tenma, let's both..... That's weird? Tenma?"

Harutora turned around, his face frozen. Tenma, who he had been talking with a second ago, had already snuck away to the other end of the table and was talking with the other members of the group. Once he noticed Harutora's gaze, he quickly winked and gave him a thumbs up as if to say that he was a tactful person and to tell Harutora not to worry. That action seemed nice, but in fact it was just the opposite.

Harutora couldn't help but click his tongue. Suzuka walked next to Harutora, shoving the plate in her hands into his and taking Harutora's portion of curry. Just as Harutora was about to open his mouth to protest, Suzuka had already eaten at bite of the stolen curry.

".....Hmm, it's a little bitter, but it'll do....."

"You came here to trade because the curry your group made was bad, right!?"

"What's that supposed to mean? What do you mean, bad, that's rude. It's just that..... It doesn't taste like curry rice, it's more like curry gruel, that's all"

"What do you mean 'that's all', this **is** curry gruel."

Suzuka quickly revealed her original personality once she was alone with Harutora. Harutora had long since gotten used to her sarcastic tone after half a month of being acquainted with her.

Suzuka ignored Harutora's complaints, instead glaring back ferociously and saying brashly: "What did you say? You mean my specially-made curry is bad?"

She spoke haughtily without any intent of pretense. Unlike her small, young external appearance, her princess-like attitude was already deeply rooted in her.

"Uh, I'll eat it..... Anyway, it's a waste not to." Harutora murmured, scooping up a mouthful of Suzuka's curry with a spoon and bringing it to his mouth.

This curry seemed like diluted curry gruel. The amounts had clearly been gotten wrong when it had been stewed and too much water had been added, and the vegetables - come to think of it, it had been Suzuka's shikigami responsible for cutting the vegetables - were of different sizes. In addition, there were some carrots and potatoes that weren't very easy to chew in it. But, overall, it wasn't at an inedible level. It wasn't any more or less completed than the curry of Harutora's group, it was just slightly inferior.

"......H, How is it?" Suzuka stared intently at Harutora as he frowned while trying the curry, her tone inexplicably tense as she asked.

"Hmm, it's much better than it looks."

"Wh, What does that mean? Make it clear whether you're praising it or criticizing it."

"I'm telling the truth, this barely counts as 'curry'."

"Tch - what are you being so arrogant about, you don't understand how to be grateful at all."

"Then you eat the rest of it."

Harutora replied out of annoyance and Suzuka hmphed, wolfing down Harutora's curry. She said she wanted Harutora to be grateful, but she herself didn't have any intent of eating the curry gruel.

...How unbearable.....

Harutora secretly complained to himself, eating the swapped curry.

He ate and ate, then suddenly noticed something.

Ohtomo was looking at him from the distance and nodding his head like a kindly old man. Moreover, it wasn't just Ohtomo, Tenma who sat across the table and the other students were also looking at Harutora - casting 'knowing' gazes at Harutora and Suzuka.

Some smiled from the heart, some had malice written all over their face as if asking why this again, and some showed jealous looks. Kyouko seemed to have a hard time accepting this situation, showing a perplexed appearance. Overall, the area was filled with silent acceptance - 'recognition' of the warm relationship between the two.

"......Tch....." Harutora angrily clenched his teeth.

In the eyes of these students, they might believe that Harutora and Suzuka had truly traded the curries that they had made and happily tasted each other's curries while teasing each other. To Harutora, this was a misunderstanding that could get no worse.

When they had been cooking earlier, Ohtomo had also thought the two of them were 'going out'. It wasn't what he wanted at all, but most of the students in the class - no,

most of the Onmyou Academy students - had this misunderstanding. In addition, when Suzuka entered the academy, she had publicly announced that he was her 'first kiss' in front of a large crowd, deepening everyone's misunderstanding.

And for some reason, Suzuka was extremely happy to use this misunderstanding to play around with Harutora. What's more, she even readily sowed the seeds of misunderstanding, a typical example being how she called him 'Darling' in front of others. In particular, now that Natsume's true identity had been revealed, Harutora had no way to oppose anything Suzuka did.

"......What exactly is fun about doing this..... You're too evil....."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Nothing."

Harutora frowned, speaking unhappily. But Suzuka had keen intuition and immediately noticed the reason for Harutora's bitter face. Her mouth curved like a cat playing with a mouse, revealing a sadistic and joyful smile.

She deliberately faked a childish tone and said: "Come on, Darling, you don't need to force yourself to eat it even if it's the curry I made myself~"

"......You make me so angry, you damn brat....."

"......What? You dare to use that tone with me? Careful, or I might feed you curry in front of everyone--"

"I'm sorry, I was wrong, please forgive me."

Harutora desperately apologized and Suzuka giggled, showing her snow-white teeth. In the eyes of those around them, the atmosphere between the two was definitely harmonious. It was way too unreasonable.

Then, Harutora suddenly thought of his childhood friend who was in the same position as himself. He sneakily looked at Natsume, "Ugh....." then went momentarily speechless.

Natsume's face was sunk, and she ate curry without a word.

She immersed herself in eating curry, but her gaze wasn't at her hands. Rather, it stared in the direction of Harutora and the others. Her empty expression coupled with her gloomy look frightened Harutora into a cold sweat.

...Hey, I, I can't do anything about it. Also, I wouldn't have to go through this much trouble if I weren't trying to keep your identity as a girl from being exposed.

Harutora made excuses for himself with his eyes, but Natsume didn't reply. He didn't give up, continuing to stare intently at Natsume, and in the end Natsume finally swung her head around in disdain.

"...Hey!"

"Huh? What?"

"Uh, no, nothing....."

Suzuka suspiciously looked at Harutora who hadn't been able to help but cry out. 'Really, who exactly am I going through all this trouble for', Harutora suddenly wanted to angrily shout. He had some sort of feeling, as if he had lost many important things recently.

...Exactly how long is this kind of situation going to continue.....

Actually, it wasn't just Harutora, Natsume was also impatient. The two of them had been in high spirits on the tour bus before coming to the camp, contrasting even more with the miserable present. Harutora recognized that his tolerance was already nearing its limits.

...Maybe some 'event' or 'incident' really will happen someday.

Harutora scooped curry with one hand under the blue sky, a bit of despair in his heart.

Just then, "Oh, Touji-kun, what's going on, weren't you originally going to come here a bit later?" Ohtomo spoke, and Harutora along with the other students turned their heads over one by one upon hearing him.

An academy student wearing the jet-black uniform walked over from the main entrance of the auditorium. His hair was tied up messily with a bandanna, and his looks could be described as handsome. He was Harutora's good friend, Touji.

"Touji." Once Harutora called out, Touji glanced at him as a reply.

Touji walked towards Ohtomo first. The two of them exchanged a few words, and only after talking did he walk up to Harutora and Suzuka.

"Hi, Harutora, it looks like this camp had an unexpected start." Touji said, smiling.

"I know, but how's the seal? No problems?"

"Yeah, everything was very smooth. Your dad wanted me to say a few words for him. He told you to work hard."

Harutora spoke up to ask out of worry, but Touji just casually shrugged his shoulders. Harutora originally hadn't been very anxious, but Touji's attitude was even more carefree.

Then, Touji moved his gaze to Harutora's side.

"I didn't think you would appear here, Dairenji. To think you would chase Harutora to this kind of place."

His tone wasn't provocative, but instead as if he were watching liveliness.

Since Touji already knew Suzuka's true nature, she didn't pretend.

"What stupid things are you saying? If your homeroom teacher hadn't lowered his head and pleaded for me to come, I wouldn't have been bored enough to come take part in this kind of stupid camp."

"So it was Ohtomo-sensei working behind our backs."

"What, got a problem?"

"No, it just saves a lot of trouble."

Touji just said a few knowing words back to Suzuka, who was like a biting wildcat.

Suzuka knit her brows, and Harutora also asked in incomprehension: "What?"

Touji's gaze never left Suzuka. He spoke to Suzuka in a cold yet unrefusable tone: "Actually, I have something to ask you. Sorry for interrupting your fun time with Harutora, but come with me for a bit."

Part 3

Touji first asked Suzuka to move to a different place.

They left the courtyard where the students ate, circling around the auditorium and entering the shrine area. Touji, who walked in the front, didn't say a word, and Suzuka who walked behind was naturally also silent. Suzuka's hands carried the plate of curry and her spoon as she stared maliciously at Touji's back ahead of her.

They walked all the way to the back of the shrine area. Touji finally stopped only after checking that there was no one around.

Leaves were fallen all around them, and verdant shoots had already grown on the cherry trees. The sound of birds came from the distance, resounding vigorously in the air of the shrine.

"......Hey." Suzuka couldn't stand her impatience, speaking up to prod the continually-silent Touji with barbed words. "Stop acting, aren't you getting a bit carried away?"

Both Suzuka's tone and gaze were filled with animosity and scorn. Careful wariness was also hidden inside.

Suzuka seemed not to be very good at dealing with Touji compared to Harutora and Natsume. She forced herself to be brave while wanting to hide, like a prideful schoolgirl who had been called behind the school for a lesson by a delinquent senpai. Others would definitely think that was the case if they saw them.

Though Suzuka had her guard raised, Touji didn't pay her any heed.

"I'm not acting, it's just..... I don't want to make trouble if possible." His tone was relaxed and casual, just like always.

"......Let me say first, the two Tsuchimikados are none of your business."

"I have no plans of intervening. I don't even have any desire to right now."

"Then--"

"I'm talking to you about the 'Dairenji' family situation, not the 'Tsuchimikado'." Touji spoke honestly, carefully eliminating any change in his expression or tone.

"What?" Suzuka cried out, clearly very shocked. "......Wh, What are you saying.....? Don't joke around, could it be that you want to say that you like me?"

Though Suzuka was shocked, her attitude was still unyielding. She showed a mocking smile, but Touji didn't have any response for a while. She felt more and more anxious.

"H, Hey, you're not serious, are you..... Y, You should give up on that thought, a small fry like you wouldn't suit me!"

Suzuka held the plate and spoon in her hands, slowly pulling back from Touji. Even so, Touji still silently thought for a good while.

Then, as if he had suddenly realized--

"......Right, I brought you here when you hadn't even finished eating. Go ahead and eat, it's alright, I already ate before coming here--"

"Who cares about your meals! I'll kill you, bastard!"

"Hmm.....? I see, sorry. But you can relax, I don't mean to confess to you..... No, this counts as a 'confession' in some sense, but it's not a confession of love."

Suzuka roared angrily, her face red from anger, but Touji still replied indifferently. He had especially called Suzuka out, but he looked absentminded as if he had called her out and then couldn't decide what to say. He had definitely been silent the whole way here for the same reason as well. Judging from Touji's personality, this was a very rare situation.

But, he finally made his decision.

"......Yeah, anyway, we're all lambs waiting to be slaughtered if this continues, and there's no meaning in negotiating with you. It's better to just say everything."

"......Hey, what exactly are you saying? Honestly, that's really disgusting." Suzuka cursed at him, trying to conceal her anxious emotions, but Touji didn't pay her any heed, his expression serious - even with a bit of arrogance, very like his style.

"Dairenji." He spoke while staring at Suzuka. "Do you know that there's a spiritual disaster in my body?"

"......I, I know, so what?"

"Do you know what kind of spiritual disaster it is?"

Suzuka seemed not to have expected Touji to mention this topic. She blinked blankly, carefully observing Touji's body and 'seeing' the aura from his body.

"......Hmph..... Sorry, I don't know, nor do I have any interest in finding out." She said indifferently.

Touji nodded upon hearing this.

"You can't see it, huh. I guess that's because your strength is restrained right now..... Or maybe Harutora's father's sealing techniques are exceptional....."

Touji leisurely said those words. Suzuka raised her eyebrows upon hearing that, her expression ferocious.

It couldn't be seen because her bangs concealed it, but there was a small 'X' on Suzuka's forehead. That was the magic seal laid by the Onmyou Academy used to restrain Suzuka's magical energy. It was one of her punishments, like entering the Onmyou Academy to study.

"......You--" She spoke ferociously as if she would fly into a rage at any time. "If you have something to say, then hurry up and say it. Stop beating around the bush."

"Okay, I'll let you see it with your own eyes, that'll save me some breath too. I'll test my skills a little." Touji said calmly.

He suddenly took off the bandanna from his forehead, clenching it in his right hand and bringing it in front of his chest. Then, he closed his eyes in front of the frowning Suzuka, focusing his mind.

"...First seal, purge."

He chanted the magical 'incantation' that had been set beforehand, injecting his magical energy. The incantation stirred the seal binding the oni in Touji's body, releasing its very first stage, and dirtied yin aura immediately poured from Touji's body - demonic aura.

"That--" Suzuka's eyes widened, shocked.

The 'Child Prodigy' rapidly spread out magical defenses, but the 'change' to Touji's body didn't stop. The oni whose portion of the seal had temporarily been released began to eat at Touji's spiritual body, hastening the demonic transformation - this process was forcefully altered by the new magic set in the seal, and every action was still controlled by Touji's own will.

"......Ugh." He uttered a muffled grunt of pain.

Two flickering, sharp objects sprouted from his forehead where the bandanna had been removed - growing into two or three centimeter horns. He grit his teeth, fangs slipping through his lips and growing out of the corners of his mouth.

Demonic transformation.

Immediately after, Touji borrowed the strength of the seal and forced the demon under his own control. The demonic aura exploding from his body covered him, not spreading outwards. Intense 'lag' reactions encircled his entire body, appearing half-materialized and forming a hard armor and helmet. Ohsode, domaru, gusoku.

And a helmet like the iron mask of a demon.

The armor flickered with 'lag', then fluctuated intensely, appearing as a looming, full-body suit of armor. The visible appearance of the half-materialized demon inside Touji's body was as a half-transparent armored warrior.

"......Good....."

Touji maintained this state, opening his eyes and taking a breath.

The current him looked as if he were wearing a flickering suit of armor over his Onmyou Academy uniform - an oyoroi from ancient times. Though it didn't look too stable, it was actually already maintained in a half-transformed state with magic.

"......The process went pretty smooth, but I wish the speed of the change could be a bit faster..... It looks like I'll need to practice some more."

The horned and fanged Touji grinned coldly from behind the flickering iron mask. His mighty appearance dumbfounded Suzuka.

"......A phase three..... You're a living spirit?" She spoke with a trembling voice.

"It's as you see, but that wasn't what I wanted you to 'look' at." After saying this, Touji spread his arms in front of Suzuka, maintaining his samurai appearance. Suzuka was taken aback for a while, reflexively shrinking back.

"I wanted to ask your opinion of 'this oni'. How is it? Do you have any thoughts?"

"H, How would I know what that thing is.....! I just know that it's definitely a 'Type-Ogre' spiritual disaster, but as for anything deeper..... A, And even if I'm a Divine General, that doesn't mean I know about every kind of spiritual disaster, my area of expertise is 'Imperial Onmyoudou' research. Also, spiritual disasters generally all have their own characteristics, so how could I know what spiritual disaster that demon is!" Suzuka rattled off, unable to placate her fretful emotions.

".....But, you should know."

Then, Touji furrowed his brows, closing his eyes again and focusing the demonic aura to form magical energy. He called out: "Reboot."

The released portion of the seal immediately moved in place again, binding the demon in Touji's body. The demonic aura encircling his body immediately dispersed along with the armor formed by demonic aura.

Touji breathed deeply. Horns could no longer be seen on his forehead, and the fangs by his mouth had also vanished. He had slowly undergone a demonic transformation sequence when the seal was released, but the re-sealing was completed instantly. Hence, compared to the releasing of the seal, the re-sealing had a higher response rate.

".....Yeah, maintaining the transformed state for a long period of time will be a problem from now on."

He calmly muttered, shaking his shoulders and checking his own physical condition. Suzuka was stunned for a while, unable to speak for some time.

But, maybe not wanting others to think she was cowardly, she glared ferociously at Touji, saying with a rough tone: ".....What does that mean? What do you mean by 'you should know'? What exactly are you referring to?"

"I really am beating too much around the bush. I should just say it directly."

Touji's voice was gentle. He tied the bandanna around his forehead again to change the mood.

"The demon possessing my body is from the incident two years ago, from the Tokyo spiritual disaster terrorist attack." He spoke seriously.

"...!"

Suzuka held her breath, and Touji continued speaking without paying it any heed.

"The full situation is, I heard that this demon was the one that the mastermind behind the spiritual disaster terrorist attack used himself as a vessel for. It descended into his body and finally even grew to a phase four - a Hyakki Yagyou, scattering spiritual disasters everywhere. I ran into it back then."

"....."

This time, Suzuka truly couldn't say anything. Her face was pale, the blood drained out of it, as if she might faint at any time. Her legs inadvertently trembled, and she hastily mustered the strength to stabilize herself.

Touji calmly watched Suzuka's reaction without saying anything more, just shrugging his shoulders.

"Actually, I only learned of that incident recently. My primary physician - Harutora's father - was a Mystical Investigator at the Onmyou Agency before. His rank was pretty high, so he knew information about the spiritual disaster two years ago that wasn't disclosed to the public. I asked him carefully again today just now, and I mentioned the primary suspect of the terrorist attack - Though he didn't want to say much about it, he told me that man's name."

A complex expression flashed over Touji's face, not like anger, and not sympathy either. He tried not to show his emotions as much as possible, saying his conclusion.

"That person's name was Dairenji Shidou, the National First-Class Onmyouji known as the 'Professor'..... And the father of you, Dairenji Suzuka."

Suzuka's eyes widened and her body shook - as if she had received the final ultimatum.

From her appearance, it was hard to imagine that she and her father were both National First-Class Onmyouji, and the genius Onmyouji whose power was at the top of the nation couldn't be seen in her weak figure. Once she let go of her glamorous title, she was just a young - and lonely - normal girl.

"......I....." She shook, managing to let out her voice. "I, I..... I....." The eyes that gazed at Touji showed guilt and fear. She wanted to rid herself of these emotions, but she had never succeeded. She tightened her lips and lowered her head, her thin shoulders constantly shaking.

She could do nothing facing a 'victim' of her father's harm except silently lower her head.

"Okay." Touji opened his mouth again, speaking relaxedly, completely different from the tense atmosphere that Suzuka gave off. "Next is the real topic. Listen up, Dairenji."

"......What?" Suzuka was taken aback, raising her head with an expression full of confusion.

Touji didn't pay any heed to Suzuka's reaction.

"I didn't call you here for that, I hoped that we could cooperate. Of course, the 'we' I'm talking about includes Harutora and Natsume..... Maybe also Kyouko and Tenma."

Touji spoke seriously, but Suzuka didn't understand him at all. The topic had changed too quickly, and she seemed to be unable to deal with it.

"Cooperate..... What does that mean?'

"Yakou fanatics are eyeing Natsume." Touji continued to explain. "I don't know how much you know regarding that matter, but I shouldn't need to say the reason she's being watched, right? As far as I know, she's been accosted by Yakou fanatics three times and fallen into danger. Once was not long before Harutora and I came to Tokyo, once after we came to Tokyo, and the third time happened this spring, in the second spiritual disaster terrorist attack."

"....."

"I heard that the spiritual disaster terrorist attack that happened this spring resembled the methods of two years ago, and the suspects who carried out the terrorist attack this time were Yakou fanatics. Judging from this, the prime suspect of the terrorist attack two years ago - Dairenji Shidou - was most likely also a Yakou fanatic, am I right?'

"....."

Suzuka was silent, not responding. But she hadn't ignored Touji's words. Rather, it was the opposite. She was completely preoccupied with trying to read the motive behind Touji's remark.

Touji wasn't flustered, his tone always staying calm.

"Natsume's enemies are the enemies of Harutora and me. Those enemies have already targeted us, but we don't even know what kind of enemies we're facing. Just this much would be bad enough already, but an even tougher person came out during the spiritual disaster terrorist attack last time."

".....A tougher person?"

"I'll tell you about that incident in a while..... If we include that person, we're powerless against the people who brought about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack, and we obviously know that. But even if we don't have the strength, we don't want to be played with blindly in the palm of their hand."

"So....." Touji put weight into his words, his gaze firmly staring at Suzuka. "I know that you have your own difficulties, but I hope that you can tell us what you know. We don't have anything much to tell you back, but we can only rely on your goodwill, and..... You don't need to force yourself, anything you can tell us is alright. Please help us out." He spoke truthfully and sincerely, and finally lowered his head and pleased with Suzuka: "Please."

Suzuka's whole body stiffened. She chewed her lip, frozen in place.

A long silence spread.

The breeze blew lightly, the tree leaves rustled, birds chirped lightly, and the sounds of their classmates' laughter sounded in short snippets from afar like a hallucination or the din from another world.

The girl stayed silent and speechless.

The boy waited quietly and calmly.

The long silence passed, and Suzuka slowly turned her body.

Touji finally raised his head once he noticed that she had moved. The two of their gazes crossed, and Touji saw from Suzuka's eyes that she was taking a new step forward - evidence that she had moved forward from her past.

Suzuka trembled slightly, breathing deeply.

".....Let me ask, do you know about..... The Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

Chapter 3 - Six People's Conference

Part 1

A building covered the horizon and the sun gradually sank on the other side.

In a corner of Shinjuku Kabukicho, a small alley was sealed off with magic so that no normal pedestrian came through it. The orange sun dyed the surrounding scene, making one unable to help but feel a mistaken sense of slowing time.

The brief period when day and night switched, Omagatoki.

"......Begin."

A man silently listened to the brief command that came from his headset. A large van was stopped by the sealed-off alley and the man sat in the innermost seat of the van, stretching his feet down the narrow aisle and lying listlessly across the seat back.

This man could be described with one word, which was 'inauspicious'.

He was of a young age, about twenty years old. His body was thin and gave off a proud air as if he had been carved out with a knife. He had a head of short hair dyed silver, and his ears were pierced with many earrings.

A fur jacket was complemented by jeans, and sunglasses whose lenses were plated with silver film obscured the expression on his face. His wildly arrogant, mocking smile looked as if it had been carved into his lips like an old scar, and the 'X' scar on his forehead made onlookers shudder even further.

He was an independent exorcist - Kagami Reiji of the Twelve Divine Generals.

Kagami crossed his arms, sitting in the seat and focused on listening to the message that came from his headset. A sharp gaze shot from the eyes underneath his

sunglasses, passing through the tinted car window and staring intently at the office building it faced.

Using his spirit-seeing ability, Kagami 'saw' the aura of at least several people enter the third floor, fourth floor, and fifth floor. These people possessed a strange, abnormally strong aura. The people in the building who noticed that there were threats 'invading' from the outside - they also possessed strong auras - hastily counterattacked.

Magical energy spilled forth, forming one magic after another, attack and counterattack. Magic constantly connected and traded.

A magical battle.

There was a group of practitioners battling in the building across him.

Not long afterwards, the sound of shattering glass, things falling to the ground, screams, angry roars, and the sound of incantations being chanted even reached outside the building. The opponents were resisting stubbornly, and the reports that came to his headset became more and more agitated.

But-- "......We didn't get anything." Kagami muttered, snorting with his nose.

"Uh..... Reiji? Are we not going? If we don't go soon, the action will be over." A trepid voice sounded to confirm, politely urging Kagami on.

Other than Kagami, there was also one other person left in the van. That person sat in the seat one row in front of Kagami, looking up at the building unblinkingly, his face almost pasted to the car window.

That person was a thin, slender young man, his long hair tied behind his neck, with a delicate appearance that looked like a beautiful girl's at first. However, he gave off a childish air from his body, looking like a simple-natured, weak boy.

The young man sat uneasily in the narrow seat, his hands holding a thin package to his chest. It was a sword bag used to hold a katana.

"Hey, Reiji." He turned his head to look at Kagami behind him, continuing to call out. "Are you not going? Then should I go myself?"

His voice was high-pitched, his tone like a child begging his parents to let him go out and play. Though he had requested patiently, Kagami didn't heed him at all. When he tactlessly urged him again, Kagami silently bended his extended leg, then forcefully kicked at the young man's seat from behind with a bang.

The young man shrank back in fright, momentarily becoming downhearted and looking across the seat at Kagami with a gaze that seemed bored.

The inside of the van sank into silence again. The noise coming from outside the van - from the building that had become a battlefield - became even clearer. The young man moved his gaze to outside the window again.

The magic battle in the building still continued, but it seemed to be decided. Judging from the reactions, the group of people in the building who had originally been firmly resisting were clearly having a harder and harder time facing the challenge.

Not long afterwards, the driver's side door of the van opened.

A suit-wearing young man walked into the van. He sat in the driver's seat, shut the door, and turned his gaze to the mirror that reflected Kagami behind him.

"It's over. Our side has no casualties, and no one on the other side was killed, but....." The young man reported with a calm tone, a wry smile flitting across his lips. "We specially troubled an Independent Officer with coming here, but it ended up being a waste. The incident this time has nothing to do with the 'D' file."

The young man reporting on the current situation to Kagami was named Hirata Atsune. He was affiliated with the Magic Crime Investigation Department of the Onmyou Agency Public Safety Division - the Mystical Investigators.

Last month, a Twin-Horned Syndicate member had brought about spiritual disaster terrorist attacks at various locations in the city. The Mystical Investigators had received information about remnants of that group two days ago, and Hirata, who was responsible for investigating the Twin-Horned Syndicate, had immediately conducted a secret investigation, confirming the authenticity of the intelligence, finding the hiding place of those people, and planning this raid.

During the plan this time, they had been worried the most about a certain Onmyouji who had been proved related to the whole incident of the previous terrorist attacks - and who had ended up appearing at the end of the sequence of events known in the magic community as the 'Hinamatsuri Repurification'.

A mysterious Onmyouji that the Mystical Investigators called 'D' for the moment.

The existence of the Onmyouji 'D' had long since been confirmed before, but his true identity had always been a mystery. Though they had received information many times that he called himself 'Ashiya Doman', unfortunately the truth behind that information could not be verified. All that they knew as true was that 'D' was indeed an Onmyouji with quite a strong power and that he was often close to the Twin-Horned Syndicate.

The Mystical Investigators viewed 'D' as a high-danger individual, and had been tracing him and investigating for many years. Since 'D' had been exceptionally active recently, the Mystical Investigators had specially requested the assistance of an Independent Exorcist from the Exorcist Bureau as a safeguard against 'D' intervening with this raid. The Exorcist Bureau agreed to this request, sending Kagami to join the attack operation.

In the end, 'D' hadn't intervened in the operation this time. The Mystical Investigators had originally judged that the probability wasn't high, but it hadn't been out of their expectations.

"Sorry for troubling you with coming here, but thanks to your help, the operation succeeded smoothly. Let me express sincere gratitude on behalf of the Mystical Investigators."

Hirata thanked Kagami, who sat behind him, his voice serious and his gaze not leaving the rearview mirror.

His honest, sincere appearance wasn't like an Onmyouji, more like a priest or even pastor. However, the eyes reflected in the rearview mirror were sharp, showing a firm will. A red streak of hair was mixed in with his neat, tidy bangs, extremely eye-catching.

However, Kagami seemed not to pay any heed at all to Hirata. He stayed silent, no change in expression visible on his sunglasses-wearing face. The two of them kept quiet, but the young man carrying the sword bag timidly glanced back and forth between the two.

A light, wry smile appeared on Hirata's face again.

"Chief Amami had something to tell me. He hoped you would also come meet him."

Kagami finally clicked his tongue with a "Tch" upon hearing those words.

When he had first entered the Onmyou Agency, Kagami had belonged to the Mystical Investigators for a while, so the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami Daizen counted as his past boss.

Kagami bent his body, standing up from the seat.

"I'm leaving if you have nothing else."

"Please let me send you there."

"I don't need it."

He spoke brusquely, moving to the door and pulling open the sliding door. Hirata finally said the words: "Thanks for your work", but Kagami didn't even look at him, exiting the van.

The young man carrying the sword bag hastily followed him off the van, glancing back at Hirata, but left the area with Kagami without saying anything at all in the end.

The opened sliding door slowly slid and closed by itself.

"....."

Hirata quietly reached his hand out to the rearview mirror, adjusting the angle and watching Kagami's back in the mirror as he left.

He stayed silent, thinking, his gaze staying intently on the mirror.

Kagami walked through the evening Kabukicho.

The pedestrians who passed by him didn't dare come close, keeping as far from him as possible. Even if they didn't know he was a practitioner, they could still feel the inauspicious air he carried. Even if they were interested, they felt scared just by looking at him.

The young man who had been in the same van as Kagami followed behind him. There were about five or six strides of distance between the two.

When the two of them stood like this, it could be seen that the young man was even taller than Kagami. Because his body type was slender, he looked like a stalk of bamboo, and actually he was one hundred and ninety centimeters tall with quite a slim frame.

But his shoulders drooped and his back was hunched, so his presence was far less strong than Kagami who walked in front of him. Moreover, compared to Kagami who was dressed eye-catchingly, he just wore jeans and a shirt that could be seen anywhere. He carefully held the sword bag the whole way.

He stared at Kagami's back as if he were doing so to show his irritation, complaining: "......Hey, Reiji. How did things become different from what was said at first?" His tone sounded unhappy. "I haven't had an opportunity to do anything in a long time..... You don't need me at all for that kind of situation....."

"....."

"Really, I was happy for no point. Reiji, you've changed a lot since you got that 'X' carved on."

"....."

"Ahh, it's so stupid, I'm so disappointed."

"....."

The young man chattered, complaining continuously. Though he lowered his voice, it wasn't so low that it didn't reach Kagami's ears, but Kagami didn't have any intention of turning around at all.

Hence, the young man complained more and more vigorously, bluntly criticizing Kagami's behavior, like 'Reiji's so cold', 'Reiji's so mean', getting carried away with venting the dissatisfaction that was normally pushed inside him. The expression on his face became more and more confident.

"Also, you're too arrogant--"

"...Shaver."

Upon suddenly hearing his own name, the young man - Shaver - hastily stopped. Glancing forward, he saw that Kagami, who walked ahead of him, had also stopped and turned around, looking back.

Kagami stuck his right hand in his pocket, curling his forefinger to call Shaver up. Shaver's face lit up, like a puppy being called to its owner's side, and hurried over--

And was hit.

Kagami casually swung his fist. Shaver held his beaten head, trembling on the ground in a kneel and unable to even cry out. Kagami drew back his right hand, putting it in his pocket, then raised his right foot, kicking at Shaver's head with the sole of his engineer boots and sending him flying out.

The pedestrians passing by were all shocked, looking at the two. Shaver - still tightly holding to the sword bag - let out pitiful, sad cries, tumbling on the cement.

"Th, That's too much! What are you doing, Reiji!"

"......'Sama'."

"What? What are you saying-- Ah! N, No more! P, Please don't kick me! Let me go, Reiji. P, Please don't kick me, I'm begging you, Reiji-'sama'!"

Shaver pleaded bitterly and tearfully, and Kagami finally stopped, silently turning around and striding away. Shaver moaned quietly, but finally stood up while feeling his nose, chasing after Kagami.

The pedestrians watched the pair leave, stunned. Not a single one of them had noticed that when Shaver had been hit, his body - his contour - had immediately distorted and interference had shot through his body. Of course, no one there probably knew that it was a phenomenon called 'lag'.

Shaver hastily caught up to Kagami, walking forward behind him again.

The distance between the two was even closer than just before. Shaver stared tearfully at Kagami, grumbling resentfully.

"......Hey, Reiji......sama? Could you have forgotten that you wear a lot of rings as hard as rocks on your hands? Honestly, those rings are weapons, they're like brass knuckles. If you hit someone else with that, he might have already died from it."

"You can't die anyway."

"No no no! That's not the problem! I'm warning you, don't randomly make deadly attacks!"

"There would be no problem if you obediently shut up and didn't say anything stupid."

Reiji spoke extremely coldly. Shaver frowned, glaring indignantly at his back.

Then, as if having a flash of epiphany, Shaver asked: "Could it be that you're actually very annoyed because that 'D' person didn't appear?" He had obviously not learned a lesson at all from being beaten just now.

Like always, Kagami didn't respond immediately, but he didn't ignore it.

"Hmph." He laughed coldly. "I already knew that person wouldn't appear. Though I'm not sure what drives him, at least the place just now didn't have that kind of 'atmosphere'."

"Atmosphere?"

"......My intuition tells me. For example, last time..... After dealing with the Nue, several people who should be interesting bait gathered in 'that place'." Kagami spoke coldly, as if he were talking to himself rather than explaining to Shaver. "Anyway..... Even if that person appears, it'll just be a fight..... But it's better for me if he hides behind the scenes for now."

"Why?"

"The hounds are eaten after the hares are killed - that's plausible. Moreover, the opponent is a wild beast, not a hare, so there was no choice but to loosen the collar on this mad dog."

"......I don't understand at all, what exactly are you saying?"

"I'm talking about you."

"Me?"

Shaver asked back, his eyes widening blankly. Kagami looked over his shoulder, staring at Shaver - the shikigami he used - and showed a grin.

By the fact that Kagami had received permission to summon Shaver, it was evident how seriously the Mystical Investigators - along with the Onmyou Agency higher-ups who had accepted the Mystical Investigators' requests - viewed the existence of 'D'. Hence, they had especially lifted the ban - though they had added limitations - and permitted him to use the shikigami as a method of opposing 'D'.

The most important factor for such a change was that during the ending of the spiritual disaster attack last month, Kagami and Independent Exorcist Kogure Zenjirou had crossed paths with 'D'. The two Divine Generals had verified 'D's existence first-hand, and they had expressed that the opponent's strength wasn't something to look down upon. This forced the Onmyou Agency to take urgent and definite countermeasures, and though they understood the risks, they could only allow Kagami to use Shaver as a last resort.

"......So, we don't need to put all our effort into hunting these wild beasts. Rather, we should take this opportunity to increase our 'bargaining power'."

"Bargaining power?"

"Increasing the cards in our hand..... Right, I still should properly retaliate against that tricky bastard of a teacher." He spoke quietly, killing intent as sharp as a blade spilling from the eyes under the sunglasses.

When Kagami and Kogure had happened across 'D', there actually had also been another Divine General present. That person was a former Mystical Investigator - so

a past work senior to Kagami - an Onmyouji named Ohtomo Jin. At the time, Ohtomo had placed a 'curse' on him to limit Kagami's actions.

After that, Kagami had done a complete investigation, checking that the 'curse' Ohtomo placed was just second-class magic - also known as a 'lie'.

Kagami had noticed from the start that Ohtomo's curse was probably nonsense, but Kagami knew extremely well what kind of person Ohtomo was, so he couldn't assert that the curse was one hundred percent lie. Hence, even if he believed there ninety-nine percent of it was harmless, he could only back off.

Simply put, Kagami had been played. They had bet their lives and carried out a trick involving life and death. Since Ohtomo had gotten the best of him, Kagami naturally refused to let it rest and obediently admit defeat. Moreover - "......It shouldn't be only 'D' who wants to taste that bait....." He thought of the people from back then - the Onmyou Academy students Ohtomo had tried to protect.

Tsuchimikado Natsume.

Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Ato Touji.

Not only had the first two been born in the famous Tsuchimikado family, the main family successor Tsuchimikado Natsume was rumored to be the reincarnation of the great Onmyouji Tsuchimikado Yakou, the ancestor of modern magic and the culprit who caused a calamity of spiritual disasters. Actually, Yakou fanatics were suspected of having tried to find and directly contact him two or three times.

The other person, Ato Touji, was a living spirit with a demon housed in his body, and that demon was very possibly the descended 'something' that the prime suspect Dairenji Shidou had used himself as a vessel for during the spiritual disaster terrorist attack - the 'Great Hinamatsuri Purification'. The demon was sealed now, and the

person who had done the seal was another Tsuchimikado, the father of Tsuchimikado Harutora.

Most interesting of all, he heard that even the 'Child Prodigy' of the Twelve Divine Generals had entered the Onmyou Academy to study this spring. Her name was Dairenji Suzuka, the daughter of Dairenji Shidou who had made Ato Touji become a living spirit. The more he thought, the more he felt that fate was quite fickle.

After inquiring, he had learned that the 'Child Prodigy' entering the Onmyou Academy was the will of the Onmyou Agency higher-ups as punishment for the incident she led to last year.

With that, a new question emerged. The 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka had originally specialized in researching 'Imperial Onmyoudou', and the Imperial-style was founded by Tsuchimikado Yakou, the foundational magic system of modern Onmyoudou. Even the incident she had led to was based on that research - in other words, it was an incident 'related to Yakou'.

Since there was such a connection, why had the higher-ups decided to have her enter the Onmyou Academy where Natsume, rumored to be 'Yakou's reincarnation', was? It was said to be a simple punishment, but it was actually to bring about the next incident - preparing the stage to let her research further.

".....But to be honest, Dairenji Shidou also belonged to the Twin-Horned Syndicate - fanatics who worshipped Yakou."

Dairenji Shidou was the one who had brought about the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack, causing the Yakou fanatics to be notorious culprits in the magic community. Why had the Onmyou Agency let the daughter of such a man research Imperial Onmyoudou? Even if she wasn't allowed to stand on the frontline and had to do research work behind the scenes because she was a minor, it was still hard to

understand why she was permitted to carry out research related to Tsuchimikado Yakou.

"......It's too suspicious."

Now, these people bore a burden that even they didn't know about. It was as if people expected that they would produce some kind of change by bumping into each other.

Most importantly, Ohtomo - a previous Divine General - had taken up teaching on this stage and become a teacher after resigning from Onmyou Agency work.

The Onmyou Academy.

Right now, that place had become the place most interesting to Kagami. He believed that that was true for 'D' and the Onmyou Agency as well. Anyone in the 'industry' who was well-informed and who had keen senses would definitely treat the Onmyou Academy as an object of high interest.

"....."

Kagami continued to ponder. The cunning brain behind his proud expression was making various assumptions and continuing to scrutinize.

Shaver, who had long since been ignored, looked at his master from the side, and quietly said: "......Reiji looks really happy."

After saying that, he smiled. The fear, anxiety, weakness, and gloominess from before were no longer visible in the smile. It was as if one could glimpse a deep, bottomless darkness underneath his pretty appearance. That was what kind of smile he revealed.

Shaver was Kagami's shikigami, and Kagami used this shikigami like a slave. However, no one forced Shaver. He had made this decision himself, agreeing himself to become Kagami's shikigami.

He had seen what kind of a man Kagami was and decided that only he was suitable to be his master.

As they walked, Shaver's eyes suddenly widened and he hastily turned around, looking at a building in the distance across the street like a dog hearing an extraordinarily high sound that humans couldn't hear.

Kagami's body also shuddered a step slower than Shaver, reacting. He looked in the same direction as his shikigami, narrowing his keen eyes from underneath the sunglasses.

".....A spiritual disaster..... It looks like its phase is pretty high."

He couldn't see the complete picture because the building blocked it, but he could still see the distorted aura low to the ground in the distance, signs that it was about to transform into miasma.

There was a spiritual disaster happening in the distance. It looked like it had already developed into a phase two. Its location was also quite tricky, right on top of an aura flow. After ninety more minutes - or maybe it wouldn't even need that much time - the spiritual disaster would soon enter phase three.

"It's here again..... this chaotic world."

Since the spiritual disaster terrorist attack last month, the aura flow inside Tokyo had been disturbed, and the rate of spiritual disaster occurrences had accelerated. Presently, a phase two spiritual disaster was no longer unusual, and even phase threes - mobile spiritual disasters - emerged one after another.

While Kagami coldly looked at the spiritual disaster in the distance, Shaver's reaction was completely different from his.

"Reiji."

His thin shoulders rose excitedly, and the eyes that stared at his master showed expectation and eagerness. However, Kagami just hmphed, not caring about him.

"Who cares about a spiritual disaster, the agency hasn't given orders yet either."

Work time had long since ended, and today he had even gone to assist by request of the Mystical Investigators. He had already reported before leaving, and had directly left work after the incident was resolved. Even if the spiritual disaster had happened closer, he had no obligation to go purify it.

"Let's go." Kagami spoke coldly and was about to stride away, when-- "......Reiji." Shaver called out to him again, something about his voice seeming to sound a bit wrong. Kagami's legs stiffened and he quickly checked his shikigami's appearance, noticing that Shaver was standing still with his head lowered, his shoulders constantly shaking. The arms that held the sword bag were constantly shuddering, the atmosphere clearly different from before.

He mumbled with an empty expression: "......Why are things different from what you said at the start? Weren't you the one who called for me to come? But why, why do I have to suffer? I don't get it. I stay with you because you need me. If you don't need me..... Why do you call for me?" His spasm extended to his entire body as if he were desperately suppressing muscles that were trying to move by themselves. His empty and stiff expression seemed like that of a drug addict.

He slowly raised his head.

"......That can't be, right, Reiji? I'm your shikigami..... You're my master....."

The shikigami's eyes stared directly at Kagami, his gaze filled with a strange sense of 'hunger'. Kagami faced his shikigami's gaze head-on, just like when he had faced Ohtomo, letting out a cold laugh from the bottom of his heart as if he were playing with death.

"......That's true." He looked back at Shaver, replying readily, a savage, bestial smile emerging on his lips.

"Alright, let's go. It's been a long time since I've tried your 'sharpness'."

Part 2

Towards the evening, the stately tip of Mount Fuji appeared between the dim sky and the earth. The glow of the sunset was reflected in the lake, which unwittingly became tinted deep blue.

The first day of the practical skills training camp curriculum ended and the students returned to the auditorium where they were staying.

Dinner was Yamanashi local cuisine, houtou. It was a kind of thick soup where udon noodles, squash, and other vegetables were boiled with miso. It had a unique sticky feeling and tasted simple and delicious. But what moved them the most was the fact that they could eat without having to work themselves. The day of training had long since exhausted them, and if they had to control shikigami again at this time to prepare dinner for themselves, there might not be very many people who would be able to have a meal.

The camping atmosphere of the Onmyou Academy practical skills training camp had kicked off ever since they had made curry in the beginning, and the contents of the curriculum were as difficult as rumored. The subject of the coursework wasn't to use magic of a high difficulty, but rather to perform complete basic training.

For example, correctly reciting an incantation one hundred times, or releasing their strongest magical energy at first and then controlling it, gradually releasing all of the magical energy in a controlled state. They went through iterated, boring, and difficult trainings one after another.

The curriculum paid particular importance to magical energy transformation. The amount, the distribution, and the time were finely regulated to the point where even the effects of one's breathing and movements were controlled. Though the process of transforming magical energy was just a moment, any subtle condition could affect the outcome. The imagination was especially important for this, and hence the

teacher in charge emphasized the importance of understanding what kind of structure the magic being used had.

There was also traditional training like letting a waterfall pour onto their bodies, exercising their spirit, and chanting incantations on an altar. These contents were more like special training than class - like 'exercise'. After the whole day of class, never mind cooking dinner, there were quite a few people who couldn't even swallow their food.

"......I really underestimated the camp. I didn't think it would be this tiring....."

"Yeah..... I'm already out of energy."

Harutora lay spread-eagled on the tatami in his room after eating dinner in the dining area.

There was a time set for bathing after eating. The students could essentially do whatever they wanted before sleeping, but even in this rare trip outside, not only was he not in the mood to have fun, the other students were just as quiet and deathly tired.

Natsume sat next to Harutora. She exhaled.

Natsume had the highest power in the grade, but even she also believed that the training camp curriculum was more difficult than she had imagined. But compared to the other students, she looked comparatively at ease, and since she had taken magic-related training since she was small, she seemed adept at the contents of this curriculum.

There was actually also another reason why she could be this 'at ease'.

"......But how should I put it, it's fortunate that girl Suzuka didn't have the energy in the afternoon to come over and make trouble. That's the only reason we were able

to have a peaceful afternoon....." Harutora smiled wryly, speaking quietly. Natsume also inadvertently smiled upon hearing those words, saying: "Yeah."

The practical skills training camp wasn't originally planned for the first-years, but she had specifically come from Tokyo to participate in the camp. They had long since prepared themselves, thinking she would misbehave, but in the end she hadn't done anything at all, so they were also happily relaxed.

"Even though she's amazing, it's still tough for her to follow the curriculum."

"Yeah..... Even though she's a National First-Class Onmyouji, she's still younger than us, and today's curriculum was a test of stamina as well as mentally stressful."

Suzuka hadn't come to bother the two of them during training or dinner. Judging from that, maybe the situation was as Natsume said and she was deathly tired as well. She would probably sleep in the girl's rooms tonight, so she probably wouldn't bother Harutora and Natsume again tonight.

"All that's left is to bathe and sleep..... Ah! Natsume, how are you going to bathe....." Harutora suddenly thought of that matter, bending his body and casting an inquisitive gaze at Natsume.

Natsume and Harutora were both living in the male dorm, and normally she always showered by sneakily using single shower stalls. Though this auditorium was completely furnished in the accommodations aspect, the bathing furnishings were unfortunately only large bathhouses separated by gender.

Natsume laughed embarrassedly upon hearing Harutora's question, carefully keeping the other students from hearing what she said.

".....I brought the simple shikigami from before."

"The one from before..... You mean the body double shikigami?"

"Yeah, but there's actually no reason to risk using the shikigami. I'll just not bathe today."

"I, I guess, that's much safer."

Natsume actually very much wanted to wash the sweat off her body, but she was a girl posing as a guy, so she couldn't risk that kind of danger.

"Anyway, it's just a day, it'll be over if I just endure a little."

Natsume held her knees with her hands, smiling slightly at Harutora who lay on the floor. Harutora stammered a reply: "Yeah....."

Since he had long since gotten used to it in his daily life, when he happened across this kind of moment outside the dorms, it reminded him of the various inconveniences of Natsume's life and made him sympathize for her misfortune. He believed that Natsume had definitely encountered quite a bit of 'trouble' in places he hadn't noticed as well.

Just as Harutora thought of these things, Touji walked into the room.

"Harutora, Natsume, come here for a bit--" He called out to Harutora and Natsume once he saw the two, disappearing into the corridor ahead of them. Harutora and Natsume looked at each other cluelessly. Anyway, there was still a bit of time until bathtime, so the two of them stood up in unison, leaving the room and chasing after Touji.

"What is it, Touji?"

"I have something to talk to you about."

"Something to talk about? Ah, could it be your new seal?"

"That's included, of course..... Come with me first."

Touji casually replied to Harutora and Natsume, quickly advancing along the corridor. The fatigue and exhaustion of the day's camp couldn't be felt from his walking speed at all.

Touji walked straight out of the auditorium, bringing Harutora and Natsume through the courtyard and walking behind the auditorium.

There was a mixed forest behind the auditorium. It was dark everywhere, and they could only see the ground underneath their feet by the faint illumination of the moonlight and the light spilling from the auditorium. The sun was behind the mountains, the air had also become cold, and only the grass exuded the heat that it had absorbed during the day. The noise from the auditorium gradually became distant, and what sounded like the hoots of owls came from the mountain behind the shrine.

After they walked towards the forest a little more, there was a warehouse surrounded by white walls on all sides. Harutora and Natsume were brought next to the warehouse.

They had originally thought that the three of them were secretly talking, but.....

"That's weird? Kyouko, Tenma..... A-and Suzuka are here too?"

Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka had already gathered by the warehouse. Kyouko and Tenma seemed to be the same as Harutora, having been called here inexplicably. They looked at Touji in confusion as if requesting an explanation from him. On the other hand, Suzuka sat together with Kyouko and the others but didn't take the same attitude as always or pretend that she was a female idol. She leaned on the white warehouse wall, staring at Touji with a cold gaze.

".....Why is everyone gathered here?" Harutora couldn't help but question Touji, who seemed to have called everyone here.

"These are the people we're with the most normally. I want to take this opportunity to organize the information that everyone here knows." Touji shrugged his shoulders, then looked at Kyouko and Tenma. "Let me check again. Kyouko, Tenma, there's nothing good about getting involved with this matter. Even so, are you sure you want to join?"

Touji asked calmly, his tone like always. Kyouko and Tenma didn't panic upon hearing him speak up to confirm, but Harutora and Natsume were flustered.

"T, Touji?" Natsume quietly warned him, but Touji lightly waved his hand as a reply, seemingly wanting Natsume to relax and let him deal with things.

Kyouko and Tenma glanced at each other, nodding towards Touji.

".....This is related to Natsume-kun too, right? Also, it's a bit insensitive to ask that kind of question now, you should hurry up and get to the main topic instead."

"What Kurahashi-san says is right. Though I don't know what kind of matter it is..... I'll agree to it, whatever request it is."

The two of them were clearly a bit tense, but they didn't show a sliver of hesitation. "You guys are really a big help." Touji grinned, sincerely thanking them from the bottom of his heart.

Finally, he confirmed with Suzuka: ".....Dairenji, what about you? Alright?"

"Come on, isn't it annoying to keep asking over and over." Suzuka dropped those words coldly and coarsely.

Kyouko and Tenma were taken aback, turning to look at Suzuka, but she didn't care at all. Even Harutora and Natsume were dumbfounded at Suzuka's sudden change.

".....Touji? What exactly is going on?"

Harutora couldn't resist from asking. "......Hmm." But Touji still seemed to be hesitant over where to start.

"Okay, I'll get straight to the point and make everything clear. First off - since we managed to gather everyone here, I'll first let you see my gorgeous transformation."

"Transformation?" Harutora, Natsume, Kyouko, and Tenma said curiously in unison.

In front of everyone's astonished gazes, Touji calmly - and seemingly happily - took the bandanna off his forehead.

★

They had quite a few matters to get in order. Even among the things that everyone 'ought to' know, they still needed to confirm each other's acknowledgement and understanding.

One example was the rumor that Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation. Kyouko and Tenma had always avoided touching upon that topic, but now that became unnecessary concern.

Each person supplemented their own descriptions and clarified the sequence of events for other things like the fact that Natsume was being eyed by Yakou fanatics and the spiritual disaster terrorist attack that had happened two months ago. They looked over the incidents that had happened.

Once the name Ashiya Doman was mentioned, even Kyouko and Tenma couldn't help but laugh, not taking it as real. Suzuka then explained the case that the Mystical

Investigators had designated 'D', and their faces changed after listening, their expressions becoming even graver than before.

Kyouko and Tenma who weren't clear on Suzuka's true nature were extremely surprised at the contents of the conversation. Suzuka's demeanor shocked them greatly. They would jump every time Suzuka said something a bit coarsely, as if they had touched a hot potato, unable to decide what kind of attitude they should use to deal with her.

Suzuka didn't take note of the pair's reactions, continuing to speak with a cold attitude.

"Everyone takes the Yakou fanatics to be the same group of people, but actually not all of them are so extreme. Also, there are quite a few practitioners who revere and worship Yakou. Actually, before the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago happened, there were quite a few practitioners who publicly affirmed Yakou's achievements."

Most people generally considered Yakou to be the root cause leading to Tokyo's plague of spiritual disasters - 'most people' here meaning people who had more or less some magic-related knowledge - and hence they all made Yakou out to be a scourge.

But, at the same time, Yakou was a genius Onmyouji, and he had laid the foundations for the General Onmyoudou which represented modern magic. In the eyes of those who aspired to learn Onmyoudou, he was undoubtedly a great man who had left behind a legacy.

"Two years ago, since a section of Yakou fanatics set up a spiritual disaster terrorist attack, people who blindly worshipped and revered Yakou were labeled dangerous. The 'Yakou fanatics' that you talk about refer to those people. The prime suspect of the terrorist attack that happened back then - called the 'Great Hinamatsuri

Purification' in the industry - was a National First-Class Onmyouji at the time, a man named Dairenji Shidou."

"He was also my father." Suzuka said casually. Other than Touji, the other four people stared unmovingly at Suzuka, unable to speak for a long while.

Touji continued Suzuka's words, explaining about the demon living in his body that everyone had seen just now and how it was derived from the mobile spiritual disaster Dairenji Shidou had used himself as a core for. The four of them had originally known Touji had been involved in a spiritual disaster and had become a living spirit, but it was their first time hearing the details.

"The extremist portion of the Yakou fanatics are suspected to have formed an underground organization. They are also the ones who carried out the terrorist attack. I heard that Suzuka's father was also a member of the organization, and the ones who have come out to harass Natsume two or three times are probably also from the same group."

"An underground organization?" Harutora scratched his head in incomprehension upon hearing Touji's explanation.

"Does that kind of thing that seems like it would appear in a manga really exist?"

"Yes, it's called the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

"Also--" Suzuka opened her mouth again. "'D', who we talked about just now, is believed to be colluding with the Twin-Horned Syndicate. Maybe that's related to why he appeared before you all."

".....That means Ashiya Doman is also in the Twin-Horned Syndicate?"

"I'm not sure, there's no evidence that he joined the Twin-Horned Syndicate..... Actually, the Mystical Investigators probably haven't gotten ahold of definite evidence about whether he's even the real Ashiya Doman."

Harutora couldn't help but clench his teeth upon hearing Suzuka's remark. Kyouko, Tenma, and even Natsume kept silent, their faces serious.

They talked like this for a long time, the mystery still not solved. Rather, it became even more apparent how difficult and how complex the problem before them was. But even so, it was better than not knowing anything. None of them were willing to flee from reality and regret after the fact.

"That's all the information we hold right now. Yakou fanatics - the Twin-Horned Syndicate - are eyeing Natsume, and including the 'D' whose identity is unclear, they will most likely continue to think of ways to come in contact with Natsume from now on. Moreover, it seems like there are members of the Twin-Horned Syndicate mixed into the Onmyou Agency. We don't know where the enemies are hiding themselves, so we absolutely cannot be negligent. Though I say that, there's nothing we can do for now..... First, everyone has to recognize the situation." Touji looked at the five of them in turn, making his conclusion.

Suzuka, Harutora, and Natsume's reactions weren't as shocked as Kyouko's and Tenma's. The stiffening of their expressions could be felt even in the darkness. But, it was hard to blame them for having that kind of reaction.

Touji opened his mouth to speak to them as if he noticed the pair's change of heart: "Is there anything else you want to know? This is a rare opportunity."

But, it wasn't one of the two of them who raised a question.

"......Uh..... Dairenji-san."

It was Natsume who asked. Suzuka was leaning against the wall, and upon hearing Natsume call out to her, her body shivered visibly.

"......Please tell me the truth, am I..... am I truly Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation?" Natsume asked, her expression quite solemn.

"Natsume--!" Harutora couldn't help but call out, and Kyouko, Tenma - even Touji's expression changed, and they looked at Natsume--

And then gazed at Suzuka.

Suzuka's face sank. She cast a knife-sharp gaze towards Natsume.

Time that made them unable to help but hold their breath slowly flowed.

Not long afterwards, Suzuka coldly relaxed herself, narrowing her eyes and admitting: "......I can't say."

Obviously, Natsume refused to accept such an answer.

"But last year, you....."

"Back then, I believed you were Yakou's reincarnation, but..... Honestly, I had no choice back then. At the time, I believed that the only way I could achieve my goal was if 'you were Yakou'." Suzuka shrugged her shoulders as she spoke.

Suzuka was very proud, and she definitely didn't want to honestly admit that she had taken action based on optimistic speculation, but she didn't show her arrogant demeanor at all, not hesitating to admit her past wrongs. That kind of rational attitude made one remember that she originally had the identity of a researcher.

"But, right now I still believe you're Yakou's reincarnation. Even if I have no way to prove it objectively, I believe that the probability is extremely high - actually, to be honest, since current magic can't explain the existence of human souls, it's almost completely impossible to prove something like reincarnation. No matter how hard I work, it can't escape from being a 'hypothesis'."

Then, Suzuka met Natsume's gaze, her unconcerned expression carrying an ice-cold smile.

"......Honestly, I can't wait to use various forbidden magic to prove my hypothesis. Unfortunately, my magical energy's sealed, so I can only look at you helplessly without being able to do anything."

"....."

Natsume paled and grit her teeth upon facing Suzuka's expression like a cat staring at a mouse. However, she didn't look away, gazing unwaveringly at Suzuka.

"H, Hold on, Natsume-kun, y-you met Dairenji-san before? And what do you mean, your magical energy is sealed?" Natsume didn't know how to respond for a while upon being asked this by Kyouko.

Just then, maybe believing that the incident last summer was irrelevant to the issue they were currently discussing, Touji agilely took a step forward. "As for that--" He planned on casually finding some excuse to gloss this over.

"It's alright." Suzuka brusquely interrupted his words, sounding a bit self-deprecating. "I don't want to have people misunderstanding that you and I have some kind of peculiar relationship. Also, if that incident spreads, it's the Onmyou Agency higher-ups that'll get hurt, it doesn't matter to me."

Then, Suzuka herself explained the truth behind the news-making incident last year to Kyouko and Tenma. Believing that Natsume was Yakou's reincarnation, she had tried to repeat Yakou's forbidden magic, and hence she had been punished, a part of her magical energy had been sealed, and she had been forced to enter the Onmyou Academy. Kyouko and Tenma stared blankly upon hearing it, stunned and speechless.

"......So Harutora-kun and Touji-kun transferred in at such a strange time because....."

"Right, it was related to that incident."

Touji confirmed Tenma's speculation with a pointed tone. If Suzuka hadn't taken action first, Harutora and Touji might not have been in this kind of place discussing these things with everyone.

Then, Suzuka lifted her bangs again, showing the small 'X' on her forehead.

"And this. Who do you think placed this seal?"

"Huh?"

"It was your father, the leader of the Twelve Divine Generals, Kurahashi Genji."

"......!" Kyouko shrank back for a moment, speechless.

Kyouko was from the Kurahashi family, which had been a branch family of the Tsuchimikados in ancient times. In contrast to the Tsuchimikado family, which had rapidly declined after Yakou's death, the Kurahashi family was now the family with the strongest influence in the magical world. Kyouko's grandmother held the post of Onmyou Academy Principal, and her father held the posts of the Onmyou Agency Chief and the chief of the Exorcist Bureau.

As for the latter, Kurahashi Genji, who was the current head of the Kurahashi family, he was entitled the reputation for being the current 'most outstanding Onmyouji' in terms of power and character. As Suzuka was a National First-Class Onmyouji, he had judged that it was necessary for him to seal her himself, or else Suzuka might remove the seal on her own.

Suzuka put her bangs back down.

"Anyway, the Imperial-style is currently seen as an old system of magic, and magic related to the realm of souls is designated as forbidden magic. It's very possible that we'll never know whether Tsuchimikado Natsume is Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation after all, unless someone breaks the taboo and steps into that territory like me."

Suzuka shrugged her shoulders maliciously and a bit grandiosely. Natsume's lips stayed pressed together, carefully considering Suzuka's conclusion.

"......Ah, but, well..... Right, maybe that thing could be useful." Suzuka realized that she had misspoken, hastily correcting herself. "That thing?" Touji keenly pursued the question.

She silently thought for a while. Though it wasn't clear what kind of ideas were floating through her head, a lonely, self-deprecating smile showed on her face.

"......I really shouldn't have said that much, but whatever. I specialized in researching Imperial Onmyoudou. People believed that I was the authority on modern Yakou research, but I actually wasn't the pioneer in that field. Before me, there was another person who researched the Tsuchimikado Yakou who was widely regarded as taboo. That person carried out deep and thorough research in this field, establishing a complete system step by step by himself. When it comes down to it, my research was only completed using that person's results as a foundation."

"......T, To think that was the case." Natsume spoke, dumbfounded.

Natsume - after all, she was the person who suffered the most from the reincarnation rumors - had read as many books related to Yakou research as she could collect, but this seemed to be her first time hearing that a researcher existed who could shame even Suzuka.

"That's right." Suzuka admitted readily as if giving up. "That person belonged to the Imperial Household Agency's Lingering Spirit Division, which has already been dissolved..... He once worked with my father, and his name was practically never made public. I heard he was an extremely able researcher. I'm an insignificant small fry in front of that person."

"Wh, Who is that person?"

"I said, that person's name wasn't made public, so how could you know him."

"Even if I don't know him, maybe there are other people who know him."

"Saotome Ryou."

"....."

Harutora observed the others, noticing that, including Natsume, no one had any reaction towards this name. Suzuka showed an expression that said this was within her expectations, casting him a scornful gaze.

Natsume swallowed.

".....That person once belonged to the Imperial Household Agency Lingering Spirit Division, so he was a member of the Twin-Horned Syndicate we just mentioned, right? Where is he now?"

"I don't know that. I investigated once because I was interested. The Mystical Investigators hold a lot of information on the Lingering Spirit Division, but not even a year after my father was appointed head of the Lingering Spirit Division, that person published several papers and reports and then completely vanished without a trace. I guessed that he might have resigned from the Lingering Spirit Division and taken up different work in another department..... But honestly, that person's main topic of research was Yakou himself, while I research Imperial Onmyoudou. There really was no reason for me to make a fuss finding his whereabouts."

".....So you mean he wasn't related with the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago?"

"I can't say."

Suzuka frowned upon hearing this question out of Touji. She spoke bluntly and without reservation, and since she now had no reason to conceal anything, she probably truly wasn't clear on the details.

"More relevantly, Saotome Ryou's theory was quite unique, and in his thesis - actually, more like in the notes that he transcribed - he claimed that one could use the 'Raven's Wing' to judge whether someone was Yakou's reincarnation."

Natsume gasped upon hearing that remark, the first to react. Kyouko, Tenma, and Touji were also surprised.

"The 'Raven's Wing'..... is it?"

"Right, I've heard that that thing chooses its owner by itself. All we know is that it indeed carries aura. General Onmyoudou believes that thing is essentially a black box, but the whole thing was just Saotome Ryou's hypothesis."

Natsume and the others were speechless, quietly listening to Suzuka's explanation. But, not everyone was like that.

"What? Hey, what kind of thing is that Raven's Wing?" The other people almost fainted upon hearing Harutora ask that. Suzuka even glared at the ignorant Harutora, showing a violent gaze as if she was prepared to hit him at any time.

Touji sighed, slumping his shoulders and beginning to explain helplessly.

"The 'Raven's Wing' - also named the 'Raven's Coat' - is the coat that Yakou often wore. Its exterior isn't quite the same as a normal coat, it's actually a haori, right? The miasma protection clothing that exorcists wear imitates the design of the Raven's Wing, haven't you seen it in pictures of Yakou?"

"Oh, so that's what it was!" Only then did Harutora finally understand what they were talking about.

Tsuchimikado Yakou had been an Onmyoudou field officer in the old Japanese army, and hence there were many pictures left behind of him wearing his army uniform.

But there were one or two where he could be seen wearing a strange outer coat over his army uniform. It was a pitch-black coat that looked as if it had been woven out of raven feathers. The word 'raven' alluded to Onmyouji, but this actually came from the image of Yakou wearing the 'Raven's Wing'.

"That thing is being kept by the Onmyou Agency right now..... We should just have Kurahashi go over and get it for us to try, and we'll know."

Suzuka's proposal was just sarcasm; she didn't believe it was an actual possibility. Yakou's 'Raven's Wing' was in 'safekeeping' to put it pleasantly, but actually it was designated as a tool of forbidden magic and was sealed. No matter how sincerely Kyouko begged, the Onmyou Agency wouldn't agree to lend it to a mere Onmyou Academy student like her.

"....."

Natsume's right hand tightly held her left forearm, her gaze lowered with a serious expression. Harutora looked at his childhood friend out of worry, but he didn't know what to say.

The area was pervaded by a serious atmosphere. Touji sighed and said: "......Let's not bother with that right now. Anyway, we've attained our goal of spreading information for now, so let's switch to the next topic."

"Th, The next topic..... Touji-kun, are there other things to discuss?" Tenma couldn't help but speak up. He had a hard time concealing his physical and mental exhaustion, as the first day of the camp's curriculum had just ended and he was being kept here. His face sank.

Touji guiltily showed a wry smile to his classmate's natural response.

"Actually, I mostly just want to ask Dairenji - please help us out if you can, even if it's only in emergencies. I said during the day, we don't have much to repay you with,

but... Natsume, would you be willing to help Suzuka with her research, supposing it was a condition to gain Dairenji's assistance?"

"Hey, what are you saying, Touji!"

"Don't butt in, Harutora, I'm asking Natsume."

Touji coldly rebuked the discomfited Harutora.

Actually, it was a suitable condition to obtain the help of the 'Child Prodigy'. Even if her magical energy was limited, there was value in asking for her help just based on the information she had mentioned before.

"Don't expect it." However, the proposal was mercilessly rejected by Suzuka before Natsume could even speak.

"I said just now, don't lump me in with you guys. 'D' and the Twin-Horned Syndicate have nothing to do with me."

Suzuka glared at Touji who had brought up this proposal - as well as Natsume - and spat abuse, showing a self-deprecating, malicious irony that they had often seen during the discussion on her face.

"Suzuka....." Harutora called out quietly, and Suzuka lightly bit her lip upon noticing his gaze. But, that attitude disappeared in the blink of an eye. She never turned her head, not changing her stubborn attitude.

Touji thoughtfully watched this attitude of Suzuka's, as if thinking that this matter really was tricky. And it wasn't just Touji. For some reason, Kyouko revealed a probing gaze, staring at Suzuka's face with an expression as if she noticed something.

"......H-Harutora-sama..." Just then, a young girl's voice sounded from nowhere. It was the voice of Harutora's defensive shikigami, Kon.

The shikigami quietly warned them. Harutora as well as the five other people flinched out of surprise.

Then-- "Ah, found you. What are you guys doing in this kind of place?", "Hi, is this a test of courage?" Classmates walked out from the auditorium. It seemed like they had come to look for Harutora and the others.

"Wh, What is it? Did something happen?"

"What else could it be, it's baththime, of course. The third-years are done bathing..... Our time to bathe is over soon."

"Better thank us. We had to take this trip to tell you to hurry up and go bathe because you weren't in your room."

Judging from their words, it had become their time to bathe while they had been discussing. Harutora as well as the others seemed to have the same thoughts - believing that this really wasn't the time to care about bathing, but since his classmates had come over especially to remind him, they couldn't just continue discussing.

"Sorry to trouble you guys~ It's my first time on a camp, I accidentally forgot the time while we were chatting."

Suzuka immediately switched to her friendly facade, beaming at the students who had come to remind them, and then bounded back to the auditorium. Harutora and the others didn't even have time to stop her.

She didn't look back, as if believing there was nothing left to talk about, leaving Harutora and the others behind and - though she herself probably would have denied that - fleeing.

Harutora, Touji, Natsume, and Tenma glanced at each other, all helpless.

"......Hmm." Among them, only Kyouko crossed her arms, staring at Suzuka's back without looking away. She nodded, seeming to have seen some sort of clue.

Part 3

"......Mount Fuji under the moonlight has quite the otherworldly style."

In the courtyard of the auditorium, Ohtomo moved his chair to a corner with an excellent view, holding a plastic bowl and disposable chopsticks in his hand and eating his late dinner.

He relished in slurping the hot houtou, looking at the moonlit Mount Fuji and Lake Yamanaka in the distance. The tranquil breeze was comfortable and pleasant, his senses which had become increasingly slow in the city being refreshed by the presence of the vast forest behind him. The air was crisp, and Mount Fuji's tremendous aura refreshed his spirit.

As a teacher, he hadn't been able to relax for the whole day, but the beautiful scene before him right now was enough to repay his day's labors. He would have nothing more to ask for if he could have a cup of sake or shochu.....

"Ohtomo-sensei." Just then, someone called out from behind him. He turned around with a "Hmm?", still slurping houtou.

Natsume jogged through the courtyard, stopping respectfully next to Ohtomo.

"Sorry to bother you, I'm not feeling too well today, so could I ask whether I could skip the bath today?"

Ohtomo almost couldn't help but spit the food out from his mouth upon hearing Natsume's words. He thought that Natsume had been a serious student, but this was almost overly stiff.

He swallowed the noodles in his mouth.

"......Haha, Natsume-kun, don't be that serious. You don't need to come to report even this kind of thing to your teachers. Since you're not feeling well, don't force yourself and rest properly."

After saying this, Natsume replied back, her attitude a bit overly respectful, but Ohtomo could indeed see that she was being introspective. This student really was incredibly serious. Ohtomo smiled secretly.

But this was a rare opportunity, and it would be uninteresting to just let him go back. "So, Natsume-kun, do you believe you can get along with Suzuka-kun?" Ohtomo turned his body, resting his arm on the back of the chair and asking Natsume a question. He already knew the answer, and as he expected, Natsume's expression became quite difficult upon hearing this sudden question.

"......Yes..... After all, she's a National First-Class Onmyouji..... I have many things to learn from her."

She stiffly gave a respectful reply. Ohtomo nodded knowingly.

"I said this to Harutora-kun."

"Huh?"

"Suzuka-kun is actually very similar to you."

"......!"

Natsume inadvertently frowned. It seemed that she had already heard a similar opinion from someone else. Her change in expression made Ohtomo unable to help but chuckle. This reaction was a bit too easy to see through for the dignified heir of a traditional family. Of course, Ohtomo didn't give away what he thought.

"As for Harutora-kun, I asked him to take care of Suzuka-kun. I can relax, seeing him try so hard. I think you also know that girls of Suzuka-kun's age are very sensitive. It's a great help to me to have a tolerant senpai like Harutora-kun looking after her."

Ohtomo spoke casually, scooping up houtou with his chopsticks again. "......Yes." He listened carefully to Natsume's vague reply, sending the noodles to his mouth and chewing.

"You... Is there anything you're unhappy about?"

"Huh? N, No, how could I be..... unhappy....." Natsume denied it, but her face clearly showed unhappy emotions.

Ohtomo chewed his houtou noodles.

"Hey, Natsume-kun."

"Yes."

"It would be troublesome if you misunderstood, so I'll say it clearly now..... You actually don't need to worry about Suzuka-kun."

"......What?"

Natsume couldn't conceal her surprise at this sudden matter. Ohtomo deliberately ignored it, smiling slightly.

"Honestly, you're the only one in the Onmyou Academy right now who can be compared to Suzuka-kun in terms of magical knowledge, power, and position. One of you is a Divine General, and the other is the next heir of the Tsuchimikado family. Suzuka-kun - no, actually, you're the same. The two of you can only learn from each other, right?"

"S, So that's what you meant by 'worry'....."

"Hmm? What, could it be that you have something else to worry about?"

"N, No, I, that's not what I meant.....!"

Natsume hastily shook her head after Ohtomo casually asked that question. He still pretended to not notice anything, taking up an easygoing appearance.

"Actually, I'm in no position to say this kind of thing. My head was just filled with thinking about skipping class when I was your age, so I can't give students like you and Suzuka-kun any constructive opinions, sorry."

"Don't say that..... Ah, but....." Natsume didn't know what to say, hesitating for a moment, thinking of a rare mischievous idea.

"I heard that Sensei was called the 'Three Ravens of the Thirty-Sixth' before."

"Pfah."

Ohtomo hadn't expected that kind of counterattack, spitting out all the soup from his mouth. Natsume saw that her surprise attack had worked, proudly laughing to herself.

Ohtomo wiped his mouth, his face disheveled.

".....That Zenjirou was definitely speaking nonsense everywhere....."

"You get along really well, Kogure-san also called Sensei directly by your name."

"It was terrible fate. Natsume-kun, please choose your friends well, or you'll regret for a long time."

"So you really are 'friends'."

"....."

Ohtomo made a face, closing his mouth because it was a rare moment when he had nothing to say. Natsume truly laughed out loud this time.

"So Sensei, can you give me some tips on how to deal with a Divine General?"

"I can't do that, that person was an idiot when he was studying in the Onmyou Academy..... Uh, I'm actually unqualified to talk about others. The several of us were always gathering together to make trouble. We were really lax, now that I think about it."

Ohtomo shrugged his shoulders as if giving up continuing to act dumb, talking leisurely about his past school days. His attitude wasn't like a teacher, but intimate enough to make one unable to help but want to call him a senpai.

"Right, since you were the 'Three Ravens', that means that there was another friend that you had a good relationship with, right? What happened to that person?" Natsume suddenly asked.

At the start, when Kogure had chatted about this matter, Kyouko had also happened to bring up this question. At the time, Kogure had replied in a stammer, but Ohtomo's reaction was completely different.

"Right, there was another strange person. He went back to the countryside because of his family, I don't know how he's doing now..... Haha, how nostalgic."

Ohtomo replied casually without showing a bit of hesitation. If she hadn't seen Kogure's attitude with her own eyes, Natsume probably would have carelessly replied and left things at that.

"......I, I see." She was a bit suspicious, but she didn't continue to pursue the question. She didn't know whether he had noticed her change in heart, but Ohtomo didn't say anything, calmly drinking his soup.

He tasted the hot, delicious houtou, and then said: "......Right, I thought of something while talking about the past."

"Wh, What is it?"

"Hmm..... Actually, it's nothing major. I just thought that if I could give my past self some tips..... I would probably advise myself: 'Don't force yourself too much'."

"Force yourself, huh?"

"That's right." Sitting on the chair, Ohtomo raised his head slightly and looked at the standing Natsume. Then, he said: "The more people value their friends, the more

they should open their hearts. Even if it would bring the other party a burden, they should be honest."

"....."

"I told you not to be 'concerned' just now. In short, that's what I meant..... But it's not just limited to Suzuka-kun."

Ohtomo looked at Natsume who silently gazed at him, speaking in a roundabout way and sincerely conveying the emotion in his words with his tone and expression instead. Because he had talked openly about his time as a student before and was now giving advice, it sounded quite convincing indeed.

Natsume felt surprised and a bit shocked, her eyes widening slightly as she stared straight at her homeroom teacher. "......Yes." Her eyes never left Ohtomo as she humbly nodded her head.

A breeze blew from the lake, blowing through the hill where the auditorium was. Natsume's black hair, tied up by a ribbon, danced in the wind.

Ohtomo said: "......Yeah." and sat back down on the chair.

"Anyway, don't force yourself too much. You have to remember to relax, even when you're working hard. The third-years will be participating in the camp as well tomorrow, so make sure not to stay up too late."

"Yes..... Ah, sorry to bother your meal."

Natsume lowered her head in apology, always keeping her respectful attitude. Ohtomo casually waved his chopsticks, eating his houtou again and watching the back of his student as she returned to the auditorium.

"......Though it's difficult, work hard, Natsume-kun."

For a long while, Ohtomo's surroundings had only the gusts of the night wind and the leisurely sound of enjoying houtou. But when he finished eating half of his noodles, his face suddenly sank and he frowned.

He lifted his bowl, glancing to the side. There was a small cat passing through the auditorium courtyard.

It was a small calico cat with supple fur, and it looked quite clever.

Ohtomo chewed his noodles, looking resentfully at the cat walking towards him. That cat walked straight to Ohtomo, walking up in front of him and sitting down with light movements, raising its head to look at the eating Ohtomo.

Ohtomo swallowed the already chewed noodles, annoyedly and helplessly speaking up.

"......So it really was the principal. I had a feeling....."

That cat lightly waved its long tail upon hearing that.

"Just a 'feeling' won't do. There's no meaning in asking you to be a teacher if you're unable to instantly notice a sneaking shikigami."

The elegant female voice came from Ohtomo's boss - the Onmyou Academy Principal, Kurahashi Miyo. This calico cat was her shikigami. She hadn't told Ohtomo earlier that she would secretly come to the camp.

"It must be quite the trouble to use a shikigami all the way from Tokyo."

"That's right, an 'old woman' like me knows very clearly that her physical condition is 'nothing like before'. But this much won't tire me out if it's for my cute students."

"......Ha, haha..... How reliable, your ears are quite good....." Ohtomo turned his head and smiled dryly.

Incidentally, Ohtomo had met Kogure a few days ago, and he had used words like 'old' and 'nothing like before' to describe her. It seemed that the principal had clearly heard their entire conversation at the time.

".....I really can't drop my guard. It sounds like you also eavesdropped on those kids' 'strategy meeting'?"

"Don't use a bad-sounding word like 'eavesdrop'. I was just silently protecting them from the side. You definitely noticed that I was there, right? After all, you were also there at the time."

"I have the responsibility of overseeing them, don't lump me in together with an eavesdropper--"

"Oh my, since you say that, never mind those children, I also have the responsibility of supervising you."

Ohtomo who held a bowl and sat on a chair chatted under the moonlight with the calico cat gazing up at him, bickering about boring trivia. If the 'children' who had been eavesdropped on just now heard this verbal joust, they probably would have been so stunned that they would forget to be angry.

"Come to think of it, those students are advancing beyond expectations right now. It's something to be thankful for."

"You can't say that, children of this age are very difficult."

"Oh my, it's you who says that? My seniority as a teacher is far higher than yours, you know."

"I'm just a small pawn, how can I compare to you who's been the principal for many decades..... But, it's about time for us to intervene and actively help those children, now that things have developed this far. If they believe they can deal with it

themselves, it will become dangerous..... Also, it would decrease my burden quite a lot if they were able to 'escape by themselves'."

Ohtomo pretended to be humble, smiling flatteringly. The most irritating thing was that that kind of smile suited his face very well - or perhaps, it should be said that it showed his gentleness.

The cat waved its tail like a flea-ridden wild dog expressing goodwill, staring with half-narrowed eyes at the teacher subordinate to it. "......That makes sense." Then, she quietly expressed: "Maybe we should properly consider whether it's about time....."

Even though he had made the proposal, the principal's response still made a surprised expression momentarily flash across Ohtomo's face. He had originally expected the principal to instantly reject his proposal, believing that it was currently too early for that matter.

"......Do you mean we can?"

"I'm not saying to act right now, but please 'make the preparations', Ohtomo-sensei." Saying this, the cat stood up with nimble movements.

It turned its back to Ohtomo, walking towards the auditorium without as much as a farewell. Ohtomo actually didn't have much to say, so he silently watched the cat leave, but.....

"......Do you know about the 'Raven's Wing'?"

The cat immediately stopped moving, going silent for a second, and uttering: "I don't know."

Ohtomo indifferently continued to speak towards the cat whose head wasn't even turned back.

"I heard that it was a fake that was sealed in the Onmyou Agency."

"......Is that so?"

"Yes, some people believe that the real thing is in the Onmyou Academy."

"......Who did you hear that from?"

"That person."

The cat turned to look at Ohtomo.

Ohtomo sat in the chair, still holding the bowl and chopsticks in his hands and his expression no different from usual as he stared intently at the principal's shikigami.

The gazes of the two met.

They were aimless gazes, and they inadvertently fell silent, but anyone watching would instantly know that in this seemingly meaningless space was developing an extremely intense magical battle of high-difficulty second-class magic techniques.

Not long afterwards, the cat tossed its head, waving its tail and soundlessly passing through the courtyard to leave.

Ohtomo's face remained unchanging, calling out: "...Principal?" Meow, the cat called.

Ohtomo smiled wryly, scooping up some now-cold houtou and sending the noodles to his mouth.

Part 4

After bathing, the students returned to their rooms based on age and gender.

They prepared for bedtime one by one. Needless to say, they had to spread their futons on the ground to sleep. They also wanted to play cards or have pillow fights, but not a single person in the class still had the energy to play around.

After they spread their futons, someone turned off the lights. Because the wooden door by the balcony was tightly shut, the interior of the room went pitch-black once the lights were turned off. Considering that this might be dangerous, they had put a desk lamp in the corridor as a light source.

"......Ahh..... I can finally sleep." Once the room light was turned off, Harutora lay on his futon, exhausted of mind and body.

Harutora had been quite occupied after they had talked with Kyouko, Tenma, and Suzuka. His mind had been full of those things even up till now. But, the accumulated fatigue in his body was already nearing his limits. He thought that the best thing to do now was to properly sleep and put all his worries in the back of his mind for now.

Touji and Tenma slept next to him, already lying on their futon. They slept next to him but had no intention of chatting. It seemed that, just like Harutora, they were unwilling to think anymore.

There was one more person in a similar situation.

"......Are you alright, Natsume?" Harutora turned his head as he lay on the bed, asking quietly.

They could faintly identify the contours of each other by the weak light passing through the paper door. Natsume had already changed to athletic clothing and was nested in her bed.

Natsume had laid her futon near the corner of the room, by the wall. Though the room was spacious, there were many people sleeping after all, and the space allotted to every individual was small. Actually, there was only enough space for a textbook between Harutora and Natsume's futons.

"......I, It's really close."

"W, We can't do anything about that."

"......Uh, if you roll over....."

"Don't worry, I won't roll over..... Ah, no, I'll be careful and make sure not to roll over....."

Maybe because he had no confidence in his sleeping habits, Harutora became more ambiguous as he spoke. Natsume lowered her head and didn't say anything. Harutora also felt a bit awkward, closing his mouth.

Natsume was clearly flustered. This was probably her first time sleeping in the same room with so many people, and it was especially hard to blame her for being anxious since everyone around her was a male and she was the only girl. Though Harutora felt sympathetic, he could do nothing about it.

"Maybe you should just leave your body double here and sneak out to sleep somewhere else. That might let you sleep a bit better."

He quietly made a proposal, but Natsume suddenly shook her head upon hearing that.

"It's alright, especially since I... I'm very tired."

She unconsciously let out her original voice, hastily changing her tone. It seemed that she was indeed tired to death. Natsume had felt the most sense of urgency from the talk just now, so her energy had rapidly been consumed.

Then, she rolled over to face Harutora, and pulled the sheets up, covering her mouth.

"Uh..... Harutora-kun."

"Wh, What is it?"

"Uh..... It's all guys here, so I feel very uncomfortable..... Will you stay next to me?"

"Oh, yeah....."

He couldn't clearly see Natsume's expression in the darkness. Harutora felt his own cheeks inexplicably redden as he made a reply.

"".....You need not worry." Suddenly, a voice sounded from between the two. Their hearts pounded and their bodies stiffened in their sheets.

"Tonight, I shall be responsible for protecting Natsume-dono, 'no one' will be able to touch her."

It was Kon's voice. Though her figure couldn't be seen, her tone was haughty, and her tone had been heavy when she had said 'no one'. Then, she added: "Of course, if Natsume-dono's sleeping habits are poor, I shall 'deal with it properly', do not worry."

Even though she hadn't materialized, they visualized the image of Kon glaring ferociously at Natsume. Natsume rebutted in a high-pitched voice: "M, My sleeping habits aren't bad."

Regardless of what Natsume said, it was indeed comforting to have Kon supervising on the side. "Sorry to bother you." Harutora told his shikigami.

"...Then let's leave it at that. Good night, Natsume."

"Uh, yeah, good night, Harutora."

"....."

"....."

"......But it really is close....."

"......Yeah....."

Harutora smiled dryly and said a few uneasy words, thinking that the same kind of smile might be on Natsume's face. Kon coughed lightly a few times, clearly angered by listening.

"......So close....." Natsume's attitude became panicked, as if she had suddenly realized something was wrong. She turned her back to Harutora, bending her body - moving as if she were sniffing the collar of her athletic clothing.

"......Huh? What's wrong?"

"Uh, nothing....." Natsume replied in a stammer, her body no longer bent. "......It's just a short day, so why not have those around you tolerate it?" But Kon immediately spoke up, uttering harsh and malicious words.

Harutora didn't understand, but Natsume seemed angry enough to grind her teeth.

Not long after, the body whose back was to Harutora squirmed uncomfortably again.....

"......I, I'm going to the bathroom! Harutora, you sleep first!"

She suddenly rushed out of her sheets, passing through the room and leaving through the corridor.

"Wh, What happened?"

Harutora murmured, clueless and dumbstruck. Kon snorted in disdain next to him.

★

The hot water had probably stopped, but it wasn't like it was impossible to shower in this season.

Natsume jogged through the calm, silent auditorium, rushing to the bathhouse.

Males and females were originally split into different baths, but right now it was no longer distinguishable which side was for males and which side was for females. Anyway, there shouldn't be anyone inside, so Natsume sneakily entered - checking the surroundings first - the changing room.

She didn't turn the light in the changing room on, hastily taking off her athletic clothing and putting it in a locker. Then, she untied the ribbon tying up her long hair, letting her black hair fall onto her fair body.

It had been the same when she had first started living in the dorms. Though she had avoided the gazes of others, she always kept her guard up when she was completely naked in an unfamiliar place. Just in case, she wrapped herself with a towel first, then walked into the bath.

Fortunately, it was still very warm in the bath.

Moonlight shone in through the misted window near the ceiling, faintly illuminating the old but still elegant-looking bath. There was still hot water in the bath, so Natsume finally relaxed.

Thinking carefully, she had always showered in the dorm showers. Other than when she went back home for New Year's, she hadn't stretched out in a big bath for a long time. Though the hot water was probably a bit cold, she still felt fortunate. Just as she happily smiled, holding the towel and walking to the bath--

"Oh my, you don't need to hold the towel that tightly, aren't we both girls?"

"Hey, what are you doing! Give me the towel back!"

There were people in the other bathhouse, and the voices that sounded were clearly familiar ones. Right, it was definitely Kyouko and - Suzuka. Natsume's heart almost stopped beating out of fright, her whole body stiffening.

However, she came to her senses and quickly hid, planning on quickly returning to the room, but she couldn't help but be curious as to why Suzuka and Kyouko would be together. She hesitated for a while, finally deciding to be prudent and cast as much stealth magic as she could, staying where she was. She gingerly, quietly, sneakily, sank her body into the bath while making as little noise as possible.

Then, she perked up her ears.

Judging from the sound of it, Kyouko and Suzuka were still chatting in the bath next to her. From the contents of their chat, she learned that Suzuka didn't want to bathe with others, and after Kyouko learned that, she forcefully pulled her over to bathe. Honestly, that greatly surprised Natsume. Before the gathered discussion with everyone just now, Kyouko hadn't spoken with Suzuka much, and she shouldn't even have known about Suzuka's true nature until just now.

But the tone she spoke with was familiar and extremely intimate.

"Hey, I know I shouldn't request this of a Divine General, but it's a bit weird to use a respectful tone with a kouhai who's younger than me. Can I call you by your name like Harutora does?"

"I don't care what you call me! Do whatever you want!"

"Hmm, okay then, Suzuka-chan."

"Chan?"

"What's wrong with it, we get along that well."

"What are you joking about? Who gets along with whom? Don't get it wrong! You outsider who only has a family background!"

"That's not true, friendship has nothing to do with position, right, Suzuka-chan?"

"Damn! You're so annoying!"

Suzuka's angry roars came from across the wall.

Judging from the sound of it, Kyouko was in control of the situation. It was Natsume's first time hearing Suzuka's tone this flustered.

Kyouko was like a big sister in the class, responsible for stepping forward to put everything under control. She had a fearless personality, and could calmly pose as a senpai to the National First-Class Onmyouji (yet still a kouhai) Suzuka. Such communication ability and courage in facing others was admirable, as expected of the eldest daughter of a famous family.

She was definitely smiling right now, cajoling the abuse-spewing Suzuka. Natsume knew it was inappropriate but couldn't help but smile.

"Stop speaking nonsense, give me my towel back! Give it back!"

"I saw everything already anyway, so you don't need your towel, right?"

"You pervert exhibitionist! If you like to exhibit then go exhibit somewhere else!"

"Oh my, you can't say that, I don't have such interests. I just don't understand what there is to hide when we're both girls--"

"Shut up, you dairy cow!"

"Hey, Suzuka-chan, no one's ever said such rude things to me."

"I'll say it since no one else has, you brainless dairy cow!"

"Really, I don't have anything to be proud of. I was bathing with my classmates today and saw that there are other people even bigger than me."

"Y, You bitch.....! Your tone sounds like you've won, coincidentally hinting that you're 'big'!"

"Don't be concerned, you're still young--"

"Go die! Why don't you hurry up and die!"

Since she had become acquainted with Suzuka, Natsume had never dreamed that there would be a day when she would identify with her from the bottom of her heart. She even felt that the two of them could become close friends.

But, Kyouko didn't have any intention of caring at all, casually saying: "I never thought I could chat so happily with the 'Child Prodigy'. I'm so happy."

".....Let me say this first..... I should first make it clear that I don't have any such interest!"

"Come on, I don't either, I only like guys, just like a normal person."

"Yes, yes, that's good. Good, then I'm going to go sleep!"

".....Hey, Suzuka-chan."

"I'm done bathing! I'm leaving!"

"Do you like Harutora?"

"Uwah!"

Natsume was lucky that the others didn't notice her. She completely forgot about stealth, crying out in surprise at the same time as Suzuka did. But, she understood that she shouldn't panic right now, but rather she should intently watch the situation unfold. She stayed invisible, completely engrossed, focusing her attention to her ears. She could do nothing else.

"I'll kill you, bitch! I'll cut you to pieces!" Suzuka said.

"Hahaha, you don't need to be embarrassed."

"Aaarrrgghhhh!"

A voice that didn't sound like it came from a human sounded from the other side of the bathhouse wall. Natsume felt deeply sympathetic. Even so, she still strained to perk up her ears.

"I can't stand you, I really can't stand you, I'm leaving--!"

"Hoho, do you think you can escape from my grasp, Suzuka-chan?"

"Don't hug me! Stop touching me! What's your hand doing! This is a crime! Stop touching!"

"Ahh, so cute."

"Aaargh!"

Natsume soaked in the bath, holding her knees and trembling. What was going on on the other side of the wall? She was very curious, but she didn't dare learn about the situation in detail.

But, she had never thought that Kyouko would have this side to her. Could it be that this was how girls really interacted? If she had entered the academy with the identity of a girl, would she be treated similarly? Please spare me - Natsume couldn't help but beg for mercy in her heart.

"That idiot has someone that he likes already! He doesn't care the slightest bit about me!" Suzuka wailed.

Natsume's eyes widened.

"Huh, no way, really?"

"That's right! Let me go!"

Natsume's heartbeat accelerated intensely. Her cheeks instantly reddened as she soaked in the bath to which hot water was no longer being provided.

Upon hearing that response, Kyouko became quite calm - even her expression. She murmured an "Oh.....", not pursuing the topic any further.

".....Then what about Natsume-kun? You don't actually know how to get along with him, right?" Kyouko suddenly asked. No, she hadn't suddenly thought of this question, she had probably already calculated the opportunity. This was her most important goal.

Suzuka held her breath, and Natsume's body also went rigid.

The heavy silence pervaded the atmosphere, and then as if to break the tension - "Yeah, sorry for asking that kind of thing. But actually, I can see that you don't get along too well. But Natsume-kun is actually very easy to get along with, he's just a bit slow--" Kyouko gingerly defended Natsume. Suzuka stayed silent, and Natsume couldn't conceal her tension, focusing all her attention on the other side of the wall.

Quite a long time passed, and everyone remained silent.

"You don't know anything at all....." Then, Suzuka dropped those muttered words.

"...What?" Kyouko asked back. Then, the splashing noise of someone rising from the bath sounded.

"That person..... is too cunning. I hate her....."

She spoke straightforwardly, brutally stabbing Natsume's heart.

The pitter-patter of her footsteps led to the changing room. "Suzuka-chan!" Kyouko chased her.

The door between the bath and the changing room was opened. The sound of the door sounded from the other side of the wall, and the presences of the two vanished afterwards.

Natsume soaked motionlessly in the bath. She remembered Ohtomo's advice - the more you value your friends, the more you should open your heart and be honest. She shut her eyes, carrying difficult-to-suppress emotions and pulled her head under the water.

Her black hair floated on the surface of the water. Natsume held her knees tightly. Only a bit of warmth was left in the water.

Part 5

The dead of night. The Onmyou Academy Principal Kurahashi Miyo was left alone in the principal's office of the Onmyou Academy building, tidying up unfinished work.

The room had an old-fashioned and calming interior as well as various furniture that had been taken good care of, matching greatly with the aged yet still elegant master of the room. She felt that she could do more in this place than in her own home. In particular, that feeling had become stronger after she had given the position as the head of the house to her son. She believed that she still had many responsibilities to the Onmyou Academy.

She had been doing this busy job for close to half a century. Principal Kurahashi's old body had recently been having some trouble with her long working hours. Her old friend, the Mystical Investigator Chief Amami Daizen, had also always joked about similar things. She understood that she was declining day by day without Ohtomo having to say anything.

"......I hope that I can at least hold on until the day those children are independent....." She murmured to herself, sitting in front of her great redwood table and finishing tasks.

Just then, a doorknock sounded in the principal's office, and the principal's expression momentarily changed.

As the Onmyou Academy Principal, she hadn't noticed anyone approaching at all before the doorknock sounded in the principal's office.

"....."

She lowered her glasses, placing them on the table and watching the door intently.

The students and other teachers should have all left already. There was no one left in the academy building, and the two shikigami Alpha and Omega hadn't informed her beforehand that there was anyone entering the building.

There were no abnormalities in the barrier of the academy building, and no outsider could possibly break through the hurdles set up in the incantation and reach this place - However, if such a thing truly happened, she was definitely unable to deal with the opponent before her, so there was nowhere to run anymore.

"......Who is it?"

The principal prepared herself, asking calmly, definitely not allowing the other person to hear how worried she was.

A reply came from the other side of the door.

"It's me."

Once that voice sounded, the principal's eyes widened in surprise. She hadn't expected this surprise guest.

"......Please enter."

The principal left her seat as she said this, walking to the door and opening the lock.

The door opened. A man stood in the corridor.

It couldn't be told what age the man was. He looked about thirty, but judging by a few thin white hairs, it wouldn't be doubtful if he said he was fifty. He wore a pair of metal-rimmed glasses, with the slightly dark eyes of an intellectual underneath his glasses. He was dressed in a natural kimono, making one unable to help but associate him with an ancient scholar.

"This is truly....." The principal looked at the guest, smiling nostalgically as she spoke. "What a surprise."

"......Sorry for bothering you this late." The man let out an indifferent, clear, and deep voice.

The principal opened the door, moving back and welcoming the man in. The man lightly nodded in respect, quietly walking into the principal's office.

The principal shut the door.

"You haven't come to the Onmyou Academy in very long."

"....."

"I should tell you, your shikigami has also come to Tokyo. I happen to have a student who is under his care. You came with him, right?"

"....."

The man didn't reply to the principal's words. He deliberately ignored her, simply not paying her any heed. He walked into the center of the principal's office. The principal offered to him to sit, but he didn't sit, standing and looking at the bookshelves in the room. He seemed to be confirming something, looking as if he had no interest in the books.

He gave off an ice-cold air from his body. Even so, the cordial attitude of the principal didn't change.

"Why didn't you contact me earlier if you were coming? You almost scared me to death. You can't play around in an old person's home." She spoke leisurely and relaxedly, like an elderly old mother that was meeting her son - and also like a teacher reminiscing over a past student. Actually, the man had once studied at the Onmyou Academy and was a graduate of the academy.

"...Please stop using your 'second-class magic', I didn't come here to reminisce as a graduated student." The man spoke firmly, his attitude as cold as ice.

"My apologies." Sadness momentarily flashed through the principal's eyes, but her face immediately returned to normal as she prudently lowered her head in apology.

"Then please allow me to reconfirm - sir, what have you come here for tonight?" The previous head of the Kurahashi family respectfully asked.

The current Tsuchimikado family head, Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi, looked back indifferently with a cold gaze.

Chapter 4 - The Girl's Determination

Part 1

The sky was still dusky when Touji woke up.

Tenma next to him still hadn't woken up, and most of the students were still snoring in slumber. Weak rays of light passed through the gap in the wooden door, and he could faintly hear the sound of bird songs outside. Maybe dawn had just broken.

Anyway, he wouldn't be able to fall asleep if he went back to sleep. Judging this, Touji decided to leave his bed a bit early, making as little sound as he could and quietly walking out of the room.

He washed his face in the bathroom, then walked out of the auditorium.

Behind him was a forest. Fog pervaded the surroundings of the auditorium. He walked straight to the courtyard, clearly appreciating the beautiful scenery of Mount Fuji bathed in the light of dawn. Touji didn't have much interest in natural scenery, but the scene before him made him inadvertently squint his eyes and gaze in a trance.

"Touji?" Just then, a voice sounded from behind him. It was Natsume. She walked to the courtyard from the forest behind the auditorium.

She had already changed to her uniform. It seemed that she had been up for a while.

"Can't sleep?"

"Yeah..... I slept for a while, but I didn't sleep well. I kept waking up in the middle of the night." Natsume answered Touji's question, seeming a bit embarrassed.

Though she hadn't slept well, she didn't look too bad. She even seemed more refreshed than yesterday night, right after they had finished their discussion.

Touji glanced towards the forest behind Natsume. The warehouse was in the direction she had walked from. Maybe she wasn't using the morning to go stroll

outside, but returning to the place from last evening instead, going back and re-thinking the talk that time by herself.

"......Things seem cleared up--"

"Huh?"

"But actually, there haven't been any developments at all. But in the first place, it's very easy to stall when everyone gathers to talk." Touji turned towards Mount Fuji, speaking casually. He had brought about that congregation behind the scenes, but still said those kind of opinionated words. It was extremely like his style.

"Honestly, yesterday really wasn't like something you would do." Natsume said, not comprehending.

"Really?"

"Yeah, you always give off an independent, solitary feeling."

"Preconceived notions are truly frightening."

"But..... thanks."

"You don't need to thank me, it's too early now - but since you want to, I'll accept it graciously."

Upon hearing Touji's supercilious remark, Natsume laughed lightly, her body shaking slightly. Then, she gazed at the distant, beautiful Mount Fuji along with Touji.

The sun shone on the summit, showing a kind of mysterious beauty. The beautiful scene was reflected on the surface of the mountain lake, like a famous painting.

"You and Harutora... When you run into critical times, you're always extremely loyal to your own ways of thinking. I really admire you two." Natsume suddenly spoke up.

Touji looked at Natsume's face, puzzled. He was silent, not saying anything, realizing that Natsume's words contained no intention of wanting him to reply.

Natsume didn't notice Touji's expression, staring straight at Mount Fuji.

Then, she seemed to finally make her decision.

"......Touji, Dairenji-san hates me."

"......I thought as much."

"She has a lot of reasons for hating me, and I don't know how to deal with her, so I can't... face her openly. But, this didn't just start after she learned I was a girl, and I don't think it's because she caught on to my weak point..... Of course, she's a Divine General, and maybe her specialty in Yakou research is a reason. But..... the most fundamental reason is....."

"....."

Natsume's remark seemed like a confession. Touji didn't reply to her with carefree words, very clear as to the meaning in her words - Touji could understand the implication in those words without any extra words of explanation.

"......She hates me." Natsume said it again. "But, I hope that I can face her with more of a sincere and honest attitude. I believe I have to do that, and I hope I can manage it. That's why I was troubled for the whole night, thinking about how I could eliminate the space between us."

"......From your tone, it seems like you've already reached a conclusion."

"Yeah..... But..... If I could, I wanted to hear your opinion." She asked a bit bashfully, her cheeks reddening from tension.

Touji's reply was very clear. He shrugged his shoulders, saying indifferently: "Go then, go clear things up with Harutora."

"....."

Natsume's face flushed, and Touji couldn't help but snicker upon seeing.

Suzuka always made fun of Harutora, which was the main reason Natsume wasn't good at dealing with Suzuka. Moreover, Natsume might vaguely feel what kind of attitude Suzuka truly held towards Harutora - though Suzuka herself would deny it. After all, she wasn't a fool. Suzuka was always talking big, but she was extremely happy when she spoke with Harutora. It was really hard not to notice that demeanor.

That's why she didn't know what to do when she faced Suzuka. She inadvertently - feared.

"But..." Touji spoke lamentingly. "So you finally had the thought."

"Uh, I, I don't want to..... c-confess..... Don't misunderstand. A, Anyway, I just wanted to f-first confirm what Harutora thought, I wasn't thinking about anything else..... I wasn't thinking about anything else at all.....!"

She spoke in a stammer even more severe than Kon's, also forgetting to lower her voice. She rigidly made meaningless resistance - pointing out what she believed was an extremely important and crucial difference - of course, Touji didn't take those words as true.

But come to think of it, the conclusion Natsume had reached was actually identical to Touji's opinion.

It wasn't easy to learn of Suzuka's true feelings, but if she could understand Harutora's thoughts... Natsume could come forward and face Suzuka if she grasped Harutora's feelings to a degree. Natsume believed that she wouldn't change her mind regardless of what kind of answer she got in the end.

"Alright, strike when the iron's hot. Go wake him up."

"I, It's not that urgent! Also, going over especially to wake him up..... I, I can't do that!"

"Don't think too much of it. The conclusion won't change no matter how long you drag it out anyway."

"This is modesty!"

Natsume firmly refused, unable to throw away her modesty as a girl. Touji showed annoyance on his expression, but just then--

"Ah, found you! Natsume! Touji!" The person in question - Harutora - walked out of the auditorium, surprising Natsume so much that she jumped.

"What are you doing here! Everyone's putting their futons away."

Harutora spoke while walking out of the courtyard. Natsume was flustered, and Touji patted her on the back, but she hastily shouted out: "Okay! I'm coming right now!", rushing quickly towards Harutora who walked towards her without even looking at him. She ran into the auditorium entrance, practically in a full sprint. Stunned upon seeing her react like that, Harutora gaped and stopped his feet.

Touji narrowed his eyes, looking in the direction Natsume left, and bluntly cursed: "......Coward."

Harutora scratched his head, walking towards Touji in confusion.

"What's up with Natsume?"

"It's nothing, she's the same as usual."

"Uh, Touji, that's very different from usual."

"That's where you're wrong, Harutora. The difference is whether she expresses it or not. She's actually the same as usual."

Harutora faced Touji who seemed to know everything, full of doubt. "Wah, Mount Fuji's so pretty." Then, he noticed the scene before him, slowly breaking into a smile. These two were practically of the same mold..... Touji seemed to have something else to say, casting a cold gaze to his side.

"But..... Poor Dairenji, she completely lost at the starting line."

"What? What does that mean?'

"Nothing much - Alright, it's about time for breakfast. Let's go, Harutora."

Touji patted his good friend's shoulder, walking towards the auditorium in the direction Natsume had left. Harutora first frowned, and then looked at Mount Fuji again, smiling slightly and following in Touji's footsteps.

Part 2

The second day of the practical skills training camp, where they would have class together with the third-years, finally arrived. Harutora's class moved to the interior of the Zokusho shrine with the third-year students, holding something close to a standard 'magic competition' in a corner of the area.

Ohtomo and a teacher of the third-year students were responsible for supervising them on the side. This teacher happened to be the examiner who had administered the practical skills exam for advancing to the second-year - the instructor who had once been an exorcist.

His name was Fujiwara. After the exam last time, he had helped out training Touji on how to control the demon inside him. When he saw the second-year Touji, he lightly called out: "I'm looking forward to your performance, Ato." Touji shrugged his shoulders, slightly raising his hand in regard.

The contents of the curriculum were very simple. The second-years and the third-years would have a magic competition, where three second-years would face one third-year in a magic battle. Magical tools were not allowed other than the charms that had been prepared beforehand, and no restrictions were placed on contracted shikigami. If one side forfeited or one of the teachers responsible for supervising recognized a winner, the competition would be declared over. In other words, if that condition wasn't satisfied, the two had to keep fighting until a winner was decided. It was quite a ruthless rule.

In the morning, inside the clean shrine interior and within the barrier the two teachers had set up, the students held a showdown. Naturally, from the perspective of pure magical energy, the second-years had an overwhelming superiority in a three against one battle - but, the third-years were the victors in terms of win rates.

From the competition, it could be seen why Natsume had evaluated the third-years as 'semi-professional Onmyouji' at the start. Though every student's level of ability was different, the third-year students as a whole performed quite outstandingly. Harutora had seen professional Onmyouji cast magic several times first-hand, and as he saw it, the third-years had several students who were at the level where it wouldn't be strange to think they had already obtained their qualifications. Anyway, as the second-years hadn't formally studied first-class magic for long, it was a beating to face the third years' successive use of magic.

However, Harutora's classmates weren't bad. Among them, Natsume and Kyouko's performances were especially eye-catching.

Frankly speaking, the third-year who fought against Kyouko's group was completely doomed. Just dealing with Kyouko's defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu already exhausted him - it could be seen how strong this student's power was by the fact that he was able to deal with two shikigami simultaneously - however, there were also two other second-year students attacking at once. The victor was decided instantly, and Fujiwara-sensei's face sank.

Natsume's performance was even more outstanding. The battle was especially carried out in a one against one format, and she didn't even need to summon her shikigami Hokuto, winning effortlessly. She had originally been an excellent practitioner with a strong power, and recently her ability had become even more sophisticated. Kyouko and others cheered loudly for Natsume.

Also, Suzuka didn't participate in this competition, maybe because they believed that they couldn't let a National First-Class Onmyouji like Suzuka fight against students. Of course, she herself and the other students didn't have any problems with this decision.

Strangely, Suzuka was inexplicably well-behaved today. She had practically stormed off at the end of yesterday, but she seemed to even feel a bit awkward, naturally avoiding Harutora and the others, and was even more inexplicably distant from Kyouko. She didn't seem like she was avoiding Kyouko, but more like she was fleeing from her. Kyouko had wanted to find her to chat once, but she instantly paled and hastily fled. Harutora couldn't help but doubt whether he was seeing things.

".....That's weird, what happened with those girls?"

"I don't know..... They should have been sleeping in the same room yesterday. Kyouko probably did something."

Touji's tone was grateful. It seemed that Kyouko had secretly taken some action to rope Suzuka in..... Natsume showed a complex expression on the side as she listened to Harutora and Touji's discussion.

In the end, Touji didn't use his oni's strength. He won the fight, but he seemed not to fight seriously. Fujiwara-sensei raised an eyebrow in dissatisfaction, but Touji deliberately ignored it.

"What's wrong, Touji. Even if you have no reason to 'transform', do you think you can't use your oni's strength during class?"

"If I'm not a bit prudent, won't it be no surprise when I truly need to use it?" Touji shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

So that's what it was, Harutora thought. Touji had actually deliberately held back. It seemed that he had no intention of letting others see him become a demon other than the people he truly trusted.

Next, the third-year won against Tenma's group. Though the members also had problems, Tenma himself didn't seem to be good at fighting against others. After the competition ended, he slumped his shoulders in dejection.

Then, it was finally Harutora's turn.

"......So nervous....." Harutora muttered. Kon had already materialized beneath his feet, looking raring to go and stretching her shoulders menacingly.

But, just as Harutora was about to step into the barrier - "Okay, the morning competitions will end here. We'll continue in the afternoon, so everyone eat first." Ohtomo announced leisurely.

The lunches on the second day were bentoes sent from outside. Harutora looked for Natsume, Touji, and Tenma, eating in the shrine interior together underneath the shade of the trees. He had originally wanted to invite Kyouko and Suzuka, but the two of them had slipped away without a trace in the blink of an eye.

The other three people who ate together were abnormally quiet. Natsume kept her head lowered for some reason, Touji silently immersed himself in eating, and Tenma seemed to still be down about his loss just now - he had received a big shock, chiefly because his own power wasn't sufficiently strong. He kept sighing heavily. It was a good lunch, but the atmosphere was very awkward.

Harutora keenly noticed that something was wrong.

"Some other day we should find Kyouko and Suzuka and continue the topic from yesterday."

"The third-years are really incredible. Can we grow to that level after a year?"

"It really is nice to eat outdoors. Not only is there a great feeling of freedom, it feels awesome!"

He tried hard to liven up the atmosphere, but unfortunately his work was for nothing. He was even the first person to finish eating his bento. "I'm leaving for a bit." Bored to tears, he excused himself to the bathroom and rose to leave.

".....I can't stand this. At the least I need to get Kyouko over here."

Harutora scratched his head, walking around the shrine.

Just like Harutora and his group, the other students were gathered together eating in twos and threes. Kyouko ought to be in another group of people, but it would be a lot of work to find someone in the vast interior of Zokusho shrine. He also considered having Kon help him search, but he couldn't decide, feeling that he shouldn't dispatch his shikigami so leisurely.

"What should I do?"

Harutora murmured, suddenly thinking of Suzuka's matter.

Kyouko could probably be found eating with several other students, but what about Suzuka? She was a first-year student in the first place, and she was still keeping up her young idol persona in front of the other students and didn't really get along with others. Other than Harutora's group, there probably wouldn't be anyone eating with her.

...Come to think of it, that girl had also eaten breakfast alone in the morning.

Maybe she and Kyouko were together. But considering Suzuka's personality, it was really hard to imagine that there would be a third person with them. Maybe Kyouko was concerned about Suzuka eating alone, and had gone to her to keep her company.

".....I'll go look around the auditorium."

The second and third years were currently all in the shrine interior, and the auditorium ought to be devoid of people. If Suzuka, who was concerned about the attention from others, was alone - or eating her bento with Kyouko - it was very possible that she had chosen to return to the auditorium.

In order to confirm whether his thoughts were correct, Harutora hastily returned to the auditorium from the shrine interior.

He first went around the courtyard, not noticing anyone at all. Then, he quickly looped around to the forest behind the auditorium, looking for a while around the warehouse. This area was vast, and it was difficult to look in every corner after all, but that was because he couldn't hear anyone. If there was someone here, they should have been able to notice him running over.

However, he didn't find Suzuka or Kyouko here either. Unlike the shrine interior, this forest was tranquil, seeming to be a place without people.

If this went on, lunchtime would be about over even if he successfully found them. Helpless, Harutora could only turn back to the shrine, but before he went back, he decided to give it a try and test his luck by entering the auditorium.

He looped around to the entrance of the auditorium, pulling open the large door.

A figure appeared before him.

The person sat by the entrance, currently tying her shoelaces. Pulling open the door, Harutora walked in. That person raised her head in surprise (but there was no expression on her face, and it was actually unclear whether she was truly surprised), stopping her hands.

It was a short-haired, small-bodied girl. She wore a pure white uniform that was too large, with overly-long sleeves. Because her body was small, she looked younger than Harutora, but she was actually Harutora's senpai.

The girl gazed motionlessly at Harutora with her pretty face that essentially didn't have any change in expression at all. Harutora's instincts were correct. Her expression, with her eyes slightly widened, might be showing surprise.

Of course, the two of them hadn't expected to run into each other, and Harutora was equally surprised.

"Huh? Oh, senpai? Why are you here--"

"Tch."

"That kind of attitude as soon as we meet, when we haven't seen each other for so long?"

"Who are you?"

"What do you mean, who am I!? After you bothered me for so long before, could it be that you're pretending not to know me now? You just clicked your tongue just now, it's obvious that's a reaction you made after recognizing me!"

"I don't recognize any branch family son."

"You clearly know! Anyway, even now I still don't know senpai's name!"

"Don't get so familiar."

"Hey, what kind of attitude is that? I didn't care in the first place, but this kind of hurtful attitude really makes me mad!"

When Harutora had just advanced to his second year, he had met this third-year student several times. Before, it had always been her taking the initiative to accost him, but now she was cold and emotionless, feigning as if she had completely forgotten about that.

"Go away."

She expressionlessly spoke those words, continuing to tie her shoelaces. Harutora actually didn't have any intention of getting on good terms with her, but being treated so coldly still made him mad and displeased.

Harutora ground his teeth, lowering his head to gaze at the senpai, and calling out: "......Kon."

The senpai's fingers shook as she tied her shoelaces.

Kon, who had been summoned, immediately dropped her stealth and materialized. A pair of pointed ears sprouted from her head, and a leaf-shaped tail grew from behind her back. She floated in front of Harutora like a Japanese doll in the form of a young girl.

Harutora put his hands on Kon's shoulders, lightly pushing Kon forward to let the senpai see clearly. Kon was a bit timid, but she still listened and faced the senpai.

The senpai went motionless, her gaze stopped on her shoelaces. Not long after, she tied her shoelaces again, stubbornly refusing to raise her head. Harutora narrowed his eyes provocatively.

He gently touched the shikigami's head, saying: "Kon, let's do our best in the afternoon~"

"H-H-Harutora-sama?'

"....."

"I haven't touched your tail in a long time. Let me touch it for a bit. Oh my, your fur feels so comfortable~"

"H-Harutora-sama, w-why are you..... s-suddenly.....!"

"....."

The senpai became less and less able to move her fingers calmly. She failed at tying her shoelaces several times, and then undid the knot.

In the end, she pulled tightly, finishing the tie.

"......I thought of who you were. It's been a while, Tsuchimikado Harutora."

She spoke coldly, keeping the same expression on her face. Harutora let go of Kon, smiling maliciously and speaking.

"Yeah, I hope you're doing well, Senpai..... Alright, as you wanted, I'll hurry up and leave--"

"Hold on."

"Huh, what's wrong, Senpai? Didn't you hate others getting too familiar?'

"That..... isn't it."

"Oh, then could it be that want to talk to me, Senpai?"

"......Yeah....."

"You- want to- talk to- me?"

"......I, I..... want to..... talk....."

The senpai's shoulders trembled as she managed to utter those words. Harutora nodded his head in satisfaction. Kon watched the two of them from the side, her face twitching slightly.

"......Despicable, to think you would use a little girl as bait....."

"The one baited should think about herself."

"In that case, at least let me bring her home....."

"Give it a break! Exactly how much do you like little girls!"

"Okay, I'll settle, just let me touch her tail--"

"Oh my, what are you saying, senpai, I didn't agree to let you touch--"

"....."

"...Ahh, I can't stand you. Alright, I'll let you touch, don't stare at me like that. It should be okay if she just touches a bit, right, Kon?"

"Yes....."

Harutora turned back to look at that expressionless yet strangely urgent face. When he replied, Kon could only helplessly offer her tail towards the senpai. "Ohh." Moved, the senpai's tone trembled, and she reached her hand towards Kon's tail.

She touched, constantly and gently rubbing the tail back and forth.

".....So great."

".....Thank you for the praise."

".....Give her to me."

"Don't even think about it."

If she went on touching like this, the senpai might start rubbing with her face. Harutora saw the opportunity, calling out - his tone a bit apologetic - "Kon."

Kon immediately retracted her tail, indifferently hiding behind Harutora's back. A defensive shikigami really shouldn't use its master as a shield, but it was hard to blame her in this kind of situation. The senpai seemed satisfied, not bringing up any other requests, just following Kon with her gaze as she escaped behind Harutora's back.

She had been like this when they met before as well. It was scary that he didn't understand how serious senpai was. Though he had deliberately provoked senpai, Harutora finally regained his calm bit by bit.

"So the third-year class that came this time was senpai's class, what a coincidence."

Yesterday, when Harutora and the others had arrived at the camp, the third-year students had been training on the mountain behind the shrine. After they came back in the evening, they had been separated from the second-years during dinner and bathtime, and hence the second-years hadn't had any contact with them until today.

"Why did you pretend you didn't recognize me just now? Didn't you especially look for me to talk before?"

"......I don't want anyone to know I'm here."

"Why!? Ah! Could it be that you're skipping class? If you weren't skipping class, I would have noticed that you were here in the morning!" Harutora laughed, stunned.

"You came to participate in the camp yet you're skipping class. Senpai, you're pretty unique."

"Don't call me the same as you."

"What's wrong with it, I won't tell anyone."

"I'm not skipping class."

"You don't need to lie, why else would you not have come to class in the morning?'

"Menstrual leave."

"....."

"I'm on menstrual leave."

"......S, Sorry, I didn't....."

"I'm currently on menstrual leave--"

"I'm really sorry! I was wrong!"

Harutora immediately surrendered without saying anything, lowering his head in apology with a red face. If it were Touji, he might roll his eyes and say 'girls have it tough', but as a physically and mentally innocent male student, Harutora had no way of dealing with this kind of situation other than apologizing and hurriedly escaping the area.

The senpai's expression didn't change, shrugging her shoulders abnormally coldly. She had instantly reversed the situation, gaining an overwhelming advantage. She looked satisfied at Harutora lowering his head in apology.

"Did you know? Once every month, girls--"

"I, I know! Ah, no, I'm actually not too clear on the details!"

"I'm just resting--"

"Right, that's right! How could senpai be skipping class!"

"I didn't think... someone would frame me..."

"Sorry! Sorry!"

"And you even slandered me, how terrible!"

"It was all my mistake! Please forgive me!"

Harutora apologized again, almost kneeling for mercy. This might - no, this was definitely retaliation. Harutora knew this, but couldn't counterattack.

The senpai continued pursuing victory, facing her kouhai who desperately raised the white flag of surrender.

She snickered, saying:

"......Virgin....."

"Ugh! Urgh.....!"

Harutora had the urge to hit her, but grit his teeth and endured the rush.

Even if he had been treated with spite from the start, he was stupid to have deliberately made trouble. He couldn't help but feel extremely regretful for his actions one minute ago.

"So, what do you need with me?'

"......Uh, nothing, actually....."

"I see, then let's talk about female bodies--"

"Right, I need to participate in the magic competition in the afternoon! The third-year students all seem very powerful, so please give me some advice, senpai!"

"Magic competition? You have to use first-class magic to fight, right?"

"Yes! Please feel free to comment and suggest!" He straightened his back and asked.

The senpai let out a 'hmm', putting her hand on her slender jaw.

"If the opponent's a girl, you just need to wait until 'that day'--"

"Doing that is a bit too evil!"

"You're too naive, as expected of a virgin--"

"Shut up! That's a basic issue of human ethics!"

"If you're like that, you won't be able to win against an enemy who uses women as a weapon--"

"I don't want to fight with that kind of person either!"

He couldn't stand it. Harutora lamented, practically crying. No, tears had already welled in his eyes. Maybe noticing that her master was falling into a predicament, Kon's expression became serious. Despite the intolerable humiliation, the master and servant could only grit their teeth and endure.

But the senpai seemed to feel that she had retaliated enough - or was simply tired of it. "Let me think." Her attitude changed a bit and she thought.

"I would recommend..... just do as you like."

"......Thank you for your valuable words..... I'm grateful....."

"I'm serious." The senpai's expression was still indifferent, and her tone hadn't changed. "To tell the truth, magic is just a 'pattern'. The important part is the specification, or essentially the 'order' of things."

Surprisingly, the senpai brought up a serious topic. Harutora asked in incomprehension: "What does that mean?'

"Shikigami are a very good example."

"Shikigami..... huh?"

"Shikigami can be simply called 'patterns'. This 'patterns' means the same as a 'formula' from mathematics."

"Huh? The same?"

Harutora asked back in surprise. The senpai calmly said: "Yes." and nodded her head.

"One plus one is two, two minus one is one. Shikigami's 'patterns' are rooted in similar reasoning. Though basic theory and limitations are different from mathematics, the two both obey set 'specifications'."

"......H, Honestly, this is really too hard to understand....."

"Do you have a phone?"

"I, I do."

"Are you familiar with how the phone is constructed?'

"N, No."

"But you know that there are 'components' in the phone, right? Regardless of whether you're familiar or not, the 'components' indeed exist. Shikigami are the same. Honestly, this can also be applied to 'humans'. Components essentially also exist in humans. That view is the origin of magic. Magic is based on those 'components', a technique controlling the boundary between 'knowing' and 'not knowing'."

"....."

Harutora was taken aback. He hadn't thought that he would hear reason from Senpai - from this particular senpai's mouth.

Frankly, the current Harutora almost couldn't understand the senpai's meaning at all. He only vaguely knew that it was extremely deep 'magic theory'.

"B, But, Senpai, since you're emphasizing the structure and specification of magic, isn't that conflicting with your proposal?"

"There is a conflict."

"Then--"

"But, that's how 'magic' is. The most peculiar part of magic's 'specification' is that its 'components' do not exclude contradictions. As a whole, contradictions are also mixed into the integrated specifications, and hence it is both versatile and coordinated. This could be called the trickiest area, as well as the most meaningful part."

"....."

Harutora was stunned speechless. This talk was far outside his range of understanding.

But...

...Come to think of it.....

Ohtomo had once said similar words as this senpai. Maybe you feel that it's contradictory, but contradictions are the roots of magic - at the time, he had thought those words were just casual deceit of the students, believing that to be Ohtomo's actual goal, but maybe he couldn't just take his remark to be deliberate misdirection.

The senpai seemed to see that Harutora was completely clueless and at a loss. "Simply put, the problem is how you use it. You don't have to be too constrained." Though it was a bit deviant from her original meaning, she re-offered her suggestion, putting it in another easy-to-understand format.

".....I'm extremely grateful for your suggestion." Harutora thanked her whole-heartedly.

...The third-years really were incredible.....

He felt admiration from the bottom of his heart, but unfortunately that was completely destroyed by the senpai's extra words. She seriously added: "Praise me some more."

".....I really wish I had an opportunity to see some amazing magic that senpai cast."

He originally could have witnessed the senpai's 'practical' power through the magic competition with the third-years. Now that he had missed this opportunity today, he still had trouble concealing his regret, though he had no choice in the matter.

"You've already seen it." The senpai said.

"What? Oh, are you talking about the stealth magic you cast when we met?"

"A curse."

"When? Where? To who?"

"Just wait a little longer, the one obstructing us will disappear soon."

"Don't say such easy-to-misunderstand words to Kon! It sounds like I was the one who was cursed!"

"It was a joke."

"That's terrible!"

"I wouldn't make Kon-chan cry."

"......To think you would casually address her so intimately."

"Kon-chan, just wait a bit, I'll rope in this person and then we can stand in the same position--"

"I definitely won't take you as a shikigami!"

In the end, the senpai was still the same. Harutora couldn't help but feel that he had been an idiot for slightly admiring her. He also felt scared that he had gradually and unconsciously become used to such a way of interacting with her.

The senpai said with a never-changing expression: "Then I'll go to class."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks for your suggestion."

"Goodbye, my mas--"

"Go, go, hurry up and go if you have to."

The senpai stood up with a difficult effort, saying "Goodbye" and walking quickly towards the auditorium. Harutora and Kon sighed heavily in unison, watching the senpai's small back as she left.

That's weird, wasn't she excused from class - Only after several minutes did Harutora realize that things were strange.

Harutora's group won easily in the magical competition held in the afternoon. He cast magic, venting all of his anger at being tricked in the attack. It was one of the crucial reasons they won so smoothly.

Part 3

The practical skills training camp's curriculum ended. It had already gotten close to six in the evening.

Since there wasn't much time to rest during class, the second-years and the third-year students were mentally and physically depleted. But because the camp had ended, they felt a sense of accomplishment in addition to their fatigue.

Now, they had less than one hour of time to do whatever they wanted before returning to Tokyo. At the same time, they had to make their departure preparations in this time. The students enjoyed the freedom of their liberation from coursework, reminiscing about the camp. Since there were quite a few students who had gotten along with the third-years they had class with, there were students everywhere taking out their phones to take memorial pictures.

This was the first leisure time that school activities ought to have since they had arrived at the camp.

Of course, there were also people who didn't fit in with the surrounding atmosphere. Natsume was one of them. She didn't have any interest in reminiscing about the camp that had already ended, but instead prepared for things to be settled, looking everywhere extremely anxiously for Harutora.

Whether her expression or attitude, everything showed that she was tense and fretful. She hadn't found Harutora, but her tension was already approaching its limits.

She walked to the room of the second-year students, noticing Touji.

"T, Touji!"

"Oh, Natsume, are you prepared to go back--"

"H, Have you seen Harutora?"

"Harutora? Come to think of it, I don't know where he's gone--" Touji replied casually. "Ah." One second later, he seemed to think of something.

He leisurely sat on the tatami, looking up at Natsume.

"Right, I forgot you wanted to confess."

"What did you forget? I, I'm not going to confess, I, I just want to confirm.....!"

"Didn't I tell you to act in the morning?'

"Isn't that putting the cart before the horse? Also, we had class after that, so how could I say it.....!"

Natsume's face reddened as she declared with a lowered voice. Touji put his hands behind his back and leaned back on the ground, coldly tolling his eyes at Natsume, his expression like he was asking, 'does this girl know that there's nowhere to go after getting on the bus'?

Then, he thought of something.

"Right, I saw Harutora just now."

"Where?"

"It seems like he was called over by Kyouko."

"Kurahashi-san?"

Natsume's face sank unconsciously.

She had business with Harutora. That situation made her feel distraught. Since yesterday morning, Kyouko's attitude had been a bit different from usual.

Her bad premonition became larger and larger like a snowball being rolled. She even remembered that at the start, when Harutora had entered the Onmyou Academy, Kyouko had asked him whether he liked her. She became more and more flustered.

"I, I'm going to look for Harutora!"

"Yeah, do your best."

"You come too!"

"What? Why do I have to--"

"Don't speak nonsense!"

The classmates around them didn't get what had happened, looking at Touji and Natsume one by one. Natsume didn't pay their gazes any heed, urgently rushing out of the room while pulling Touji along.

Kyouko brought Harutora next to the warehouse behind the auditorium.

Perplexed, Harutora asked again: "Kyouko, what's going on exactly?" Kyouko firmly kept her mouth shut in front of others, only saying: "Just come with me" and forcefully bringing Harutora along.

Harutora thought she was mad, but that didn't seem to be it. Her attitude was serious, giving off an air that was difficult to describe. ...Was this matter related to Suzuka?

Kyouko hadn't come in contact with Harutora and the others for the whole day, not just during lunch, and Suzuka had been avoiding Kyouko. Harutora thought of what Touji had said, that Kyouko might have secretly taken some action.

Kyouko didn't say a word, walking straight to the place they had their discussion last night. After arriving, she finally turned around to look at Harutora. The atmosphere between the two of them was like a repeat of the scene last night.

"Sorry for calling you out so suddenly, Harutora."

"It's alright, is it something concerning Suzuka?"

"Oh my, your observational ability this time is pretty sharp."

"Thanks... Did something happen with you and that girl?" Harutora asked directly, and Kyouko nodded her head unconcernedly.

"After last night, the two of us chatted for a while. It was secret girls' talk."

".....G, Girls' talk?"

"That's right. That's why she seems to be wary of me." Kyouko playfully stuck out her tongue as she said this.

Never mind Kyouko for now, it was very hard to imagine Suzuka chatting about something like 'girls' talk'. Maybe it was actually Kyouko one-sidedly pulling her along. Harutora unconsciously thought about 'owners that became hated by capricious kittens because of their excessive enthusiasm'.

"No wonder she was running away from you today. Isn't it counter-effective like this?"

"That's not the case. I also knew that it wouldn't succeed easily. Also, there will be many opportunities to reverse the situation later."

Kyouko replied without a care and without remorse to Harutora's helpless expression.

"Also, that girl won't let anyone get close if you're not a bit forceful."

"What do you mean by getting close?"

"I meant that she won't open her heart."

Kyouko put her finger to her lip, glancing down mischievously. Her attitude was like she was playing around, but she spoke very seriously.

Harutora felt admiration from the bottom of this heart.

...This girl's observation is truly thorough.

Harutora also felt that bickering and holding a war of words with Suzuka was the best way to draw closer to her. Suzuka's personality was twisted, and she always hid the feelings in her heart. Kyouko might also have come to the same conclusion as Harutora not long after seeing the unaffected, 'true' side of Suzuka.

"Also, I roughly figured out Suzuka-chan's personality."

"S, Suzuka-chan?"

"She herself agreed to let me call her that."

"To think she would agree... Exactly what methods did you use....."

"The secret is to start by applying strong pressure and slowly soften your attitude."

"....."

She casually explained in a cute voice, but Harutora broke into a cold sweat upon hearing that. He didn't know what exactly they had done last night, but he couldn't help but feel sympathetic for Suzuka.

"We chatted last night, and I think--" Kyouko changed her tone, staring at Harutora with clear eyes.

Harutora inadvertently straightened his back.

"I believe that if we want Suzuka-chan's help, the key isn't something like having Natsume help her experiments like Touji proposed. It's actually you. You're the key." Kyouko plainly spoke her thoughts.

"Me?"

"That's right." Kyouko nodded her head seriously towards the confused Harutora.

"Honestly, Suzuka-chan and Natsume-kun don't get along very well, and she even made it clear that she 'hates' Natsume-kun..... Though it's not clear whether those are her true feelings judging from her personality, she's so stubborn that she won't possibly compromise with someone she hates. Also, not only is Suzuka-chan that way, Natsume-kun is also very stubborn, and he won't easily accept others....."

"Th, That's right."

"I think their personalities are actually very pure. It's not impossible to break down the wall, but it will need a very long time. If we have don't have many opportunities to gather like yesterday, they might never get along."

"......That's true."

Harutora believed that even if a meeting like yesterday was held a few more times, it wouldn't be that easy to undo the knot between Natsume and Suzuka. But he also understood and agreed with the meaning in Kyouko's words. In the first place, it was impossible for the two of them to construct an amicable relationship in a short time. They weren't the same as Touji, they weren't people who acted for their own 'benefit'.

Kyouko smiled, embarrassed.

"Actually, I don't really like doing things behind their backs and criticizing friends for not getting along well..... But I don't want to see Suzuka-chan continue to be alone either. Especially after hearing the things from last night, I agree with Touji's

opinion and I think that everyone should establish good relationships with each other."

"......It's great that you think that way."

Regarding the information that had crossed hands last night, it was all about the Tsuchimikado family. Even though Kyouko was their classmate, she had no relation to the entire matter. However, she took the matter as something that had happened to her own self, thinking seriously about countermeasures. Harutora really felt grateful from his heart.

"You mean that we'll put Natsume and Suzuka's issue to the side for now and first establish a good relationship with Suzuka, right? Okay, I got it. Though she loves to mess around with me, I'll try to take the initiative to talk to her."

Harutora hadn't been able to hold his head high in front of Suzuka since Natsume's true identity had been revealed. However, plain honesty couldn't gain Suzuka's trust, and even if the fact that she held his weak point in her hand didn't change, he ought to shorten the distance between them as much as he could.

...Anyway, I'll definitely just get tossed around again.

Though Suzuka was threatening, she hadn't revealed Natsume's identity yet. Maybe it was simply on a whim..... He might as well follow Kyouko's lead and try to trust Suzuka.

Though it was hard to unravel his enmity with Suzuka, Harutora had interacted with her for a very long time after all.

...Alright.

Harutora made his decision.

However, Kyouko used a sort of somewhat unusual expression to gaze at the resolving Harutora, speaking with unparalleled calmness:

"As for that..... I want to take the opportunity to ask clearly."

"About what?"

"What do you think of Suzuka-chan?"

"What do you mean, what do I think?"

"Do you like her?"

Harutora was impressively surprised. "What are you talking nonsense about!?"

"What, I'm not saying anything that's nonsense, it's a very serious question. Most of the students in the class think that you two are going out. Doesn't she call you 'darling'?"

"Th, That's true..... But you know that girl's personality, right? It's all a prank, she's just using that matter to mess around with me!"

".....Do you really believe that?"

"I don't just think that, she herself admitted it!" Harutora was a bit angry.

Among the pranks Suzuka had pulled, the most serious were the rumors of the two supposedly going out. Beginning with the 'first kiss announcement', he had long since gotten tired of Suzuka's endless teasing.

Upon hearing Harutora's agitated rebuttal, Kyouko just furrowed her eyebrows worriedly, murmuring: "Really." Then, she sank into thought like a tutor who had heard a stupid student reply with a stupid answer.

".....I wanted to know your thoughts excluding 'that part'... I didn't think I would encounter a bottleneck at this stage."

"What does that mean? What exactly are you talking about?"

"Bakatora."

"Ugh!"

An extremely familiar scolding sounded in his ears. He felt a bit moved for some reason.

Kyouko changed to an easier-to-understand format and explained in detail: "Harutora, do you remember how I said you were the 'key'? I mentioned Suzuka-chan's personality just now too. She talks big, but she actually--"

"Shut up, cowtits!"

An angry roar momentarily sounded, interrupting Kyouko's words from the side.

Harutora and Kyouko were taken aback, hastily looking back and noticing that Suzuka was scrambling at them, her face red. Kon immediately appeared, guarding Harutora's body by standing between them, but Suzuka who had suddenly burst in didn't pay her any heed at all.

"I can't listen any longer! Don't think so highly of yourself! You're always spewing nonsense and talking about useless crap!"

She rushed in front of the stunned-speechless pair, spewing abuse.

"Damn, damn! Go die! Die! You... you bitch!"

Suzuka cursed wildly. Her normal eloquent demeanor wasn't visible at all. It was clear that she was fretful, so agitated that she didn't care about what she was cursing. Harutora and Kon stared blankly from the side as they watched her Divine General self shouting and making a scene.

On the other hand, Kyouko showed a gentle smile as if she were sorry upon seeing Suzuka cursing with a red face. She honestly admitted: "Sorry, I just couldn't sit and watch Suzuka-chan, but I really shouldn't have gone ahead by myself - Sorry!" After saying that, she put her hands together, lowering her head in apology to Suzuka.

Such an apologetic attitude - She had been caught red-handed yet her attitude was unmoved. It seemed to make Suzuka even more annoyed.

"Shut up! You're so annoying! If you want to apologize, go die! Go!"

Suzuka bared her teeth, viciously cursing without stopping. Unfortunately, even Harutora also felt that her ferocious appearance lacked vigor, like a puppy barking at a large dog quietly lying nearby. He couldn't help but feel that Suzuka wasn't scary and that Kyouko's dignified presence was the true fright.

"Right, Suzuka, why are you here?"

"Isn't it just coincidence? I just happened to pass by!"

"Oh my, but didn't you just say 'I can't listen any longer'....."

"I, I didn't! I didn't say such a thing!"

"After just one night, you two get along this well....."

"What? Has your brain gone bad? How is this getting along well at all?"

"We actually have a naked relationship."

"Don't call it something like that! Has your brain gone rotten too? Also, you forced me into the bath!"

"I see, that's why you were talking about tits--"

"You don't need to remember that kind of thing so clearly!"

"Listen to me! You two, listen- to- me!"

Kyouko hit Harutora forcefully to stop his remark. Kon's regretful expression seemed like she hated herself for being unable to defend him, but it was truly Harutora's fault for receiving that blow.

Suzuka was furious, stomping the ground out of anger.

"I said so many times, I don't want to be associated with you guys! I don't care about your lives, didn't I emphasize that? But why do you still do this? You're older than me, you should be able to understand what people say!"

That hysterical, angry roar sounded like it was a roar coming straight from her heart. Harutora and Kyouko couldn't help but self-reflect deeply after the girl's intense accusation. What Suzuka said was right, they were indeed older than she was.

"Also, as for what you were talking about just now, it's like this idiot says!" She turned to Kyouko, pointing at Harutora and speaking agitatedly. "I'm just messing around with him! I'm playing around with this idiot because his reactions are really interesting, understood? More importantly, I also said yesterday, this idiot bastard has someone he likes! I messed around with him on purpose because I knew that!"

Suzuka spoke firmly. When the wary Kon heard those words, her ears shook keenly.

"What?" The man in question, Harutora, widened his eyes in surprise. Suzuka's words sounded in his ears like a thunderbolt out of the blue.

"Huh? Uh..... umm.....?" Harutora looked at Suzuka and then looked at Kyouko. Finally, he looked back at Suzuka, his mouth becoming more and more rigid. The tail of Kon under his feet swished back and forth anxiously.

Kyouko crossed her arms, glaring ferociously at Harutora.

".....Hmph, I half-doubted it when I heard yesterday..... It seems like it wasn't a lie."

"Uh, no..... It's not like that, Kyouko, I don't....."

Kyouko narrowed her eyes further, staring at the flustered Harutora. ".....Right, I remember you liked me when you entered the academy. You couldn't still be yearning for me, right?" She looked like a hooligan deliberately picking a fight.

"...Huh." The originally furious Suzuka underwent a dramatic change, her attitude instantly becoming cold as if she had taken a bullet through her heart. The fur on

Kon's ears and tail also suddenly bristled. "What did you say?" But Harutora, the subject in question, couldn't understand what Kyouko meant for a while, his face stunned.

"Didn't I reject you back then? I already have someone I like. Give up."

"No... That's not it, you're wrong, what are you saying, that's not it at all! I said back then, you were just mistaken - also, what do you mean by 'yearning', that's so old!"

Harutora finally came to his senses, fully negating Kyouko's speculation. Even though he denied it as much as he could - "Really?" Kyouko's expression was still full of doubt.

"Then who do you like?"

"UH, that question's a bit too sudden!"

"I know! Could it be like Fujino-san imagines--"

"Every single thing that pervert manager said is pure fantasy!"

"Th, Then Kon-chan--"

"I explained many times, the hotel thing was a misunderstanding!"

".....The only one left is Kinoshita-senpai--"

"Don't mention him in front of me!"

Past scars were reopened one by one, bringing Harutora a shock far surpassing his expectations and making him remember the miserable days of his youth that he had somehow gotten through.

"M, More importantly, Suzuka, why don't you say who I like? You're just pretending, right?"

He strengthened his tone unnaturally. "Quiet." Kyouko glared, speaking up to stop him.

Suzuka heard him say that and bit her lower lip. Then, she smiled coldly, making herself seem as arrogant as possible, and said: "......There's no use hiding it. Last year..... You said the girl last summer wasn't your girlfriend... But you like her, right? After we met again, didn't you joyfully say that she was actually still alive!? That the practitioner - the 'real Hokuto' was still living in this world."

Suzuka glared ferociously at Harutora, as if spitting gloom from her heart. Her gaze held indescribably complex emotions.

Harutora's heart thumped.

He hadn't expected to hear Hokuto's name at this kind of time. He felt even more alarmed that hearing Hokuto's name made him distraught.

This situation was as if a sneakily hidden diary was recited out loud by others. A problem that he had deliberately ignored and avoided thinking about had appeared in front of him at a time he hadn't expected.

"Hokuto? Who's Hokuto? Natsume-kun's shikigami also has that name....."

Kyouko questioned Harutora, and Kon also turned towards Harutora, forgetting to guard her master. Possibly concerned because she had heard the other party was a shikigami, Kon looked up at Harutora in alarm.

"......Honestly." Harutora laughed listlessly.

He was a bit embarrassed and felt a bit awkward, unwilling to let others learn about his sentimental past. He opposed and refused to let others step into this area.

But...

...Right, I've already decided to be honest.

He dismantled the wall in his heart, explaining to Kyouko - and Kon, and also letting Suzuka hear his confession from the beginning again.

Hokuto.

She was his first irreplaceable friend, who had encouraged him to become an Onmyouji.

During the explanation, memories of Hokuto were awakened one after another. Every ordinary and normal day, messing around meaninglessly, laughing and doing stupid things, the unique, precious memories left behind. At the time, Harutora didn't care about the future and wasn't concerned about society. He just naturally lived a monotonous everyday life one day after another. Thinking back now, at the time he had practically been the same as a child - he knew that he hadn't grown much, but he still couldn't help but think that way.

The golden period during the transition from childhood to puberty.

Hokuto was the symbol of those brilliant years. Harutora felt inexplicably pained as he talked about her.

One impression was especially bright. It was the night of the summer festival.

His first time seeing Hokuto wearing a yukata.

Hokuto stepping on her sandals with wooden sounds, shuttling back and forth between the booths, innocent as a child.

She incited Harutora into playing a shooting game, teasing him with a remark. Hokuto's proud and joyful smile afterwards crossed his mind, her tearful confession under the dazzling fireworks and her weeping face deeply pained his heart.

He wanted to see her so much.

He wanted to meet and talk with her so much.

That hard-to-control, intense thought assaulted Harutora, stimulating him. He desperately suppressed it, not letting his emotions explode.

He forced himself to endure.

At the start, Kyouko had been half-doubtful, but she knew that Harutora had no reason to lie. More importantly, Suzuka had seen the shikigami - Hokuto - with her own eyes, and had seen that the shikigami Hokuto truly existed. Hence, she could only silently listen to Harutora's explanation.

Kon seriously perked her ears up to listen to Harutora's explanation. She seemed to be very interested in her master's past. She stayed silent and motionless, never interrupting.

Of course, Suzuka was the same.

Harutora finished explaining the ins and outs of it, smiling slightly.

"Even now, I actually have no idea at all about that girl's true identity. I don't understand why she appeared before me or what her goal was. But I believe, no, I know, that there's a bond between us far more important than those reasons."

Harutora spoke, looking at Kyouko, Kon - and Suzuka - in turn.

"So, I still want to see her now. If she's unwilling to say, I won't force her to say the reason. I just want to meet her... and talk with her... and have fun and laugh with her like before..... I want to see her smile."

He felt a bit lonely, but he still sincerely voiced his inner thoughts.

Kon gazed at Harutora, lightly and sadly calling out: "Harutora-sama....." On the other hand, Kyouko said nothing, staring straight at Harutora.

Suzuka turned her face like she couldn't stand it anymore, her face full of anxiety and anguish that had nowhere to go.

"Didn't I say?" She said angrily and self-derisively. "I said already..... I knew that from the beginning, and that's why I messed around with him. What an immoral guy. To think you like a shikigami... I can't stand you....."

She spoke mockingly, shrugging her shoulders as if to express 'This topic is over, can we please end it'. Harutora didn't refute Suzuka's insult, as it was the truth after all.

Kyouko's reaction was different from Suzuka's, who chose to 'escape'. She had no intention of compromising at all.

She revealed a sharp gaze.

"I understand now..... But, so what? You 'like' that practitioner - the one who controlled the simple shikigami Hokuto, right? Do you 'love' her?"

"Hey hey, you're so pushy, I was so honest already."

Harutora smiled bitterly and uneasily, but Kyouko didn't let him go, forcefully asking him to speak: "Hurry up and say it."

"That..... I don't know either." Harutora said after pondering for a while.

Suzuka raised her head to look at Harutora in surprise after hearing this. Kon also gazed solemnly at Harutora.

"Honestly, that girl is my 'good friend', and I never thought about such a thing. Things just happened afterwards..... That's why we weren't able to meet again. Indeed, there isn't the relationship of 'good friends' between us anymore, but as for whether I like or hate her..... I don't really feel anything like love....." Harutora spoke embarrassedly.

Suzuka stared at Harutora with complete focus, as if she didn't want to miss a single word that he said.

"......So?" Kyouko nodded her head, continuing to question him. Harutora looked up at the sky and sighed deeply.

"So... I, I probably like her. But even though we had a good relationship, that girl was basically a mystery. There will be a lot of changes if we meet again. Anyway, I just want to 'see her again' for now! As for what kind of changes..... I don't know until I meet her!"

Harutora shouted out his inner thoughts almost self-deprecatingly. He also knew that his face was red to the tips of his ears. He hadn't been very good at dealing with such topics in the first place, and especially since it was Hokuto's matter, he was practically embarrassed to death.

But, everything he said was true. Harutora's love - he himself didn't know whether he could call it love - had been paused that summer day. The love couldn't be called a success or failure, it had become an unsolved mystery.

Harutora could do nothing about it either.

...Also.....

Also, even if he met Hokuto again..... Even if Hokuto confessed again, Harutora didn't believe that the current him would have the same reply as he would have back then. After things had happened, he was no longer his past self. His feelings from back then were now memories sleeping deep inside his heart and he could no longer put them into words.

But even so, he had never been able to truly face his own feelings. Hokuto's issue had bound his legs somehow, making him dare not advance, dare not think deeply, dare not come up with an answer.

If he didn't meet Hokuto again, he might never be able to move forward.

"......How very romantic."

Kyouko seemed to accept his answer, giving him a few words of comment. Harutora, feeling wronged, said quietly: "Shut up."

"Hmm....." Kyouko muttered, furrowing her brows and crossing her arms, as if encountering a difficult problem outside of her expectations.

"Who exactly is that?"

"Would I have this much trouble if I knew?"

"If what you said just now is the truth, it means that practitioner's ability is quite high. Not only did Suzuka-chan fail to spot it immediately, she and Harutora interacted for several years. Even if you didn't have any spirit-sensing ability at the time, you didn't notice anything wrong. Normally, that would be impossible."

".....Tenma also said similar things. He said that that person's a powerful professional Onmyouji for that to be possible.' Harutora spoke, thinking of their conversation when they had been making curry. Kyouko also affirmed Tenma's opinion, nodding and saying: "I think so too."

"That person isn't necessary a powerful, professional Onmyouji, but it's undeniable that she's exceptionally skilled. Supposing it was someone around you..... Only Natsume-kun would be able to do such a thing."

Suzuka staggered upon hearing Kyouko's casually-mentioned conclusion, her whole body stiff.

"What?" Harutora inadvertently asked back, then couldn't help but laugh loudly. "Hahahaha! What nonsense are you saying, Kyouko. How could Natsume do it, that's ridiculous. What reason would Natsume have to waste so much effort doing such a thing?"

"You're the stupid one, Harutora. I was just bringing up a technical possibility. Could it be that you didn't hear me?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry, that's true. But it's such a stretch that you thought that way. 'Natsume' and 'Hokuto'? Hahaha, what a ridiculous combination!"

Harutora thought of the difference between the two and then laughed even harder as if a joke had perfectly hit the mark. Kyouko and even Kon couldn't help but stare blankly at Harutora's appearance. Since they had been talking about a serious, sensitive topic until now, he instantly eased up.

After laughing for a while-- "Uh..... My bad, sorry. If you knew Hokuto, you definitely would have thought the comparison just now was ridiculous. It's too funny." Harutora explained, managing to suppress his impulse to laugh.

Among them, only Suzuka stared at Harutora's reaction with an expression of incomprehension, as if an assumption she had already made had been completely overturned and she had fallen into confusion.

"......H....." She hesitated over what to say. "H, Hey?"

"Huh? What is it?"

"So that means..... If you 'knew', things wouldn't turn out that way....."

"Huh? I can't really understand what you mean.....?"

This person was probably looking for trouble again. Harutora raised his alertness, asking back honestly.

However, Suzuka suddenly closed her mouth, speaking no more. Her head seemed to be whirring rapidly, but he couldn't see what she was thinking about inside her head at all. Harutora and Kyouko glanced at each other. She was also surprised.

"N, Never mind that. Anyways..... What were we talking about just now?"

".....Your relationship with Suzuka-chan."

"Right, do you get it now, Kyouko? Though it seems explaining it again now would be pointless."

"Yeah....."

Kyouko spoke in a stammer, only able to nod her head. At a loss, she looked at Harutora and Suzuka in turn.

Just then, Suzuka suddenly turned her back, walking towards the auditorium and leaving the two of them, making Harutora and Kyouko panic.

"Wh, What's wrong? Suzuka?"

They hastily called out to Suzuka, but she didn't stop her steps.

"......I'll consider it."

"Huh?"

"I don't like the feeling of this kind of secretive action..... I'll consider what we mentioned yesterday..... B-But I'm just going to consider it!"

Suzuka turned her head slightly, setting her face to conceal her bashfulness. After flinging down those words, she swung her head back around, striding away at a brisk pace. Harutora wondered whether he might be being oversensitive.

In a flash, Suzuka had already disappeared into the forest.

"Wh, What's up with that girl?"

"....."

Harutora asked Kyouko. Kyouko herself seemed to be clueless, wonder all over her face.

"We should go catch up to her first!"

"Catch up? Why?"

"Didn't we just reach a common consensus just now? We need to go on the offense! For whatever reason, Suzuka-chan managed to loosen up and talk. This is a great opportunity to achieve victory."

Slap. Kyouko smacked Harutora hard in the back, chasing after Suzuka. Though Harutora was alarmed, he still couldn't go against Kyouko in the end, leaving after her back.

In the end, Kon who was left in the area naturally chose to follow after Harutora's steps. But before leaving, she glanced towards the warehouse wall - a corner of the white wall - suspicion showing in her gaze.

"....."

But, she didn't take any other action, turning around towards Harutora again and kicking off the ground. As she dematerialized her body, her figure vanished. The sound of Kyouko calling out to Suzuka could faintly be heard from the direction Harutora and the others left.

Then.....

On the other side of the warehouse corner, where Kon had gazed at before leaving, Natsume sat on the ground holding her knees. Touji stood still with a bitter expression.

They had looked for Harutora and Kyouko who had taken him away everywhere in order to confirm Harutora's feelings. When they noticed him, it was already

inconvenient for the two of them to show themselves. Though they didn't want to eavesdrop, they ended up listening until the end. Of course, they could have just interrupted in the middle - but the two of them hadn't done that, falling into a dilemma they couldn't retreat from.

Natsume held her knees, depressed, with her head between her knees.

She had already been motionless for a while. When she had been listening to the topic of Hokuto, her face had gone pale and then red, and the final developments had made the blood drain out of her face, her body going stiff like a corpse.

Touji didn't know what to say, rubbing his temple gloomily.

Natsume was similarly silent. Seeing her current appearance, even the normally poison-tongued and sarcastic Touji couldn't possibly say 'serves you right'. Doing so wasn't just because of his feelings as a friend, but rather out of sympathy as a person.

In the forest with the sun sinking to the west, an awkward, lingering atmosphere pervaded the space between the two of them.

Touji couldn't help but sigh heavily.

"......Really, that Bakatora....."

Part 4

It wasn't noisy at all on the bus back to Tokyo, vastly different from when they had come.

The bus swayed back and forth and the students were all sunk deep in their dreams. It hadn't been ten minutes since they left the camp, but everyone on the bus was already asleep.

From this, it was evident that every student was already badly tired. Maybe he had been affected by the drowsiness around him, but even the supervising teacher Ohtomo had started snoring.

Of course, Harutora and the others weren't excluded.

Their seats were positioned similarly to when they had come, with Touji and Suzuka in the front row. The two of them leaned on the back of their seats as they slept deeply. Kyouko and Tenma, who sat in the middle, had started snoring already, and Harutora and Natsume next to them had their eyes shut as well, their bodies swaying with the bus.

A tranquil and brief time to rest. If someone woke up now, maybe they would feel a lonely emptiness like after a festival ended.

All of a sudden, the bus jumped up. "...Mmm." Harutora woke up.

He had originally planned on closing his eyes again and going back to sleep.

...Ah.

A weight pressing down lightly on his shoulder made him wake up completely.

"....."

Natsume, who was sitting next to Harutora, seemed to be sleeping deeply already, her body leaning and her head resting on Harutora's shoulder.

Several strands of thin black hair brushed across Harutora's neck, and Harutora's body felt the rhythm of her gentle breathing. Harutora's whole body stiffened, his sleepiness instantly completely driven out of his mind.

...Th, This girl..... She had just been completely down in the dumps.

When they had gotten on the bus for the return trip, Natsume had been ashen, as if shares she had purchased had just plunged and become worthless paper - or if she had been desperately escaping a maze and ended up deep in a bottomless morass in front of the exit. Regret, frustration, worry, and despair mixed together, creating a hard-to-describe atmosphere.

Harutora had acted out of worry, but Natsume hadn't responded, not even looking at Harutora, looking listlessly out of the window without any reaction and making one worry that she might twist her neck. She seemed as if she were trying to find her lost soul outside the window - where the camp was.

Harutora could do nothing other than ignore her.

"......Ugh..... Uh....." But, Natsume had ground her teeth, moaning quietly on occasion, sometimes like she had emotions that were difficult to repress, sometimes like she were a deflating balloon. "......Uuu....." She even seemed to be holding back tears, sometimes letting out a sobbing sound. She hadn't said anything, but she made one unable to help but worry whether she was insane.

Harutora remembered that she hadn't been like this when the coursework had ended. What exactly had happened during the brief period of free time after that? Harutora couldn't tell - but her sleeping face looked exactly the same as the normal Natsume.

...Actually, this girl could also be considered a mystery.....

Maybe it wasn't just Hokuto and Natsume, perhaps all girls were mysterious beings. Examples emerging in his mind - putting aside Kyouko for now - once he thought of Suzuka and the senpai, Harutora agreed with that thought even more.

Natsume kept her head on Harutora's shoulder, breathing quietly through her nose like a defenseless child. Harutora was embarrassed and nervous but didn't dare wake her rashly.

...He really didn't know what to do with her.

Harutora thought, his gaze looking towards the bus window behind Natsume. He noted the surprisingly beautiful scene outside the window, his gaze drawn in unconsciously. Outside the window, the sky was dyed in beautiful indigo colors. The sun was currently falling under the horizon. Such a beautiful scene could only be glimpsed during the brief period in which the sunlight hadn't completely vanished.

Day and night switched. Yin and yang traded places.

Like the scene from a fantasy world.

"......Mmm."

Natsume suddenly twisted her body as if she were angry, making Harutora flinch as he looked at the scenery outside the window. Then, Natsume murmured an "Nnn.....", letting out a sweet voice. She first put her forehead on Harutora's shoulder, and then her body reflexively moved away, her neck also turning the other way. Harutora obtained his release, breathing lightly and finally relaxing.

With her body turned, Natsume's long hair draped down her shoulders. Her black hair danced lightly, clinging to the chest of her uniform. The pink ribbon that usually tied up her hair seemed loosened because of this, sliding downwards.

"Ah."

Harutora reflexively reached out his hand, grabbing the sliding ribbon. He grabbed it, but couldn't tie it back up for Natsume, so he didn't know what to do.

...I'll give it back to her when she wakes up.

He had gotten used to seeing Natsume's ribbon. For some reason, Natsume always used this ribbon to tie up her hair. When Harutora had just entered the academy, he had pointed out that a ribbon wasn't suitable for a girl disguised as a guy - especially a pink-colored ribbon. Natsume had found various excuses to counter him, and even now still used this ribbon.

"....."

She loved this ribbon, so it was clear that it was quite a special object. Though Harutora thought this, looking carefully, the ribbon didn't look so expensive, but more like a cheap product that could be seen anywhere. Moreover, because it was used every day, it was already dilapidated. Why did Natsume use this ribbon so enthusiastically? Harutora felt that there was another mystery about Natsume.

...It was like a ribbon used to wrap a gift.....

"...Huh?" Thinking that, a thought crossed his mind. "No... But..." He suddenly associated it with another incident.

A pink-colored ribbon.

A pink-colored ribbon used to wrap a gift.

"......!"

Harutora's expression changed unconsciously and he gazed at the ribbon. But there were no memorable marks on the ribbon, so of course he couldn't find any 'proof' that it was related to last year's summer festival. He tried his best at remembering, recalling the gift he had given her - the bubble-blowing set he had won at the shooting game, the ribbon tied on the gift box, and her smiling as she tied the ribbon into her hair.

But, he couldn't think of it no matter how he tried.

An ambiguous, illusionary impression emerged in his mind. No matter how he reached out to try grasping the memory, there was nothing at his fingertips.

Harutora moved his gaze from the ribbon to Natsume's body. Natsume was sleeping soundly, unaware of what had happened.

"......It shouldn't be....."

Such a thing couldn't happen. He had even just denied it loudly and laughed himself hoarse because it had been brought up in front of Kyouko and Suzuka. Such a thing couldn't happen, it shouldn't..... be possible.

Harutora put the ribbon in his hand on Natsume's knees, then turned his back to Natsume, tightly closing his eyes.

He felt his own intense heartbeat, letting his body sway with the bus and trying to fall back to sleep. But he felt vaguely that even if he slept, he wouldn't sleep soundly.

The time of fantasy ended and the blue sky turned into a dark night.

The bus smoothly drove to Tokyo, leaving the camp where various emotions had mingled.

Zokusho shrine. That was the name of the shrine. It was a shrine dedicated to worship of the stars - called the Big Dipper's Shrine.

"Alright, you've worked hard. Be careful on the way back, I'll be waiting for you to return."

Principal Kurahashi calmly finished speaking these words in the Onmyou Academy situated in Shibuya, Tokyo, hanging up the phone in the principal's office.

The phone call had come from the third-year teacher who had gone to the camp - Fujiwara-sensei - reporting that the students' tour bus was about to reach Shibuya. The second-years were also coming back with them. The second-years were uninjured, and the camp had ended peacefully.

How much had the students grown after this camp? Children this age might progress rapidly after just a few days. The principal secretly looked forward to them returning to Tokyo and witnessing the growth of these students with her own eyes in the Onmyou Academy.

Among them, the ones she looked forward to the most were the two Tsuchimikados and the students next to those two.

"......What did they learn in this camp?"

She murmured, thinking of the other Tsuchimikado who had visited last night.

That Tsuchimikado had said this to her:

...'Your star is shadowed.'

The principal closed her eyes, a slight smile emerging on her lips. She didn't feel anxious or scared of the future, she just took things philosophically and let fate decide everything.

"The time has come..... I'll actively provide assistance."

Kurahashi Miyo was good at divining, named the 'Kurahashi Family's Stargazing Master'. She even possessed a strong influence over higher-ups in political and economic circles.

Even if she understood divining, she couldn't move the stars in the end, nor could she change their direction or control their radiance.

All she could do was quietly watch and trust in the stars' strength, continuing to make proposals.

"I'm hoping for a lot from you, Ohtomo-sensei. I..... I have less time left than expected....."

Principal Kurahashi's quiet voice was weak but fearless.

Night fell outside the window. Lights illuminated the big city of Tokyo, and the night eagerly waited for the young crows to spread their wings and soar.